

How to Train Your Dragon II: The Dragon Whisperer

by inhonoredglory

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Summary: Two years after Hiccup first made peace with dragons, Hiccup is faced with an enemy from his father's past, forced at the threat of Toothless' life to train the dragons that will war against his tribe and father. His escape failed and his friends captured, a friendship is tested as Hiccup faces death and shame to save his father, his love, and his friend.

1. Story Intro and Prologue: That Killer

****Story Summary****

It's been two years since Hiccup first made peace with dragons, but things are never still on Berk. Preparations are being made to induct Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third into Chief Stoick's War Council. But a visiting tribe with intimate connections to Stoick's past and his late wife threaten the peace on Berk. Hiccup, despite being the target of assassination, travels behind enemy lines to save his captured dragon. Hiccup's bonds of friendship are tested as he is forced to face death and shame to save his father, his love, and his friend.

****Note for readers of this story.****

This story is co-written by me and my sister, toothlesslove (on Tumblr). Since its inception near the beginning of our involvement in the HTTYD fandom (April 2012), we've grown much in our writing style and thematic maturity. The story reflects some of that change, so yeah the first Acts might have some writing errors that make me wish I'd done more editing XD But we did try to keep to the heart of why we wanted to write this tale in the first place: to intensely celebrate the themes of goodness, sacrifice, friendship, and love, while dwelling on the strong bond between a simple boy and his dragon, and to show that, despite all odds, a selfless love will shine in the darkest hour of hatred and violence.

Illustrations, news, and other comments for this story can be found at the following sites:

>howtotrainyourdragon2 - thecomicseries - com
inhonoredglory - deviantart - com - gallery - 38855965
>inhonoredglory - tumblr - com<p>

Do enjoy this story, and all comments and critiques are welcome!

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><p>Original author's note:<p>

a/n: My sister and I haven't been in the fandom long, but this story we came up with really inspired us, and now we want to share it with the rest of the How to Train Your Dragon fans. It's an illustrated webnovel, so there are images to go with every chapter. I'm cross-posting this story to my deviantArt and Tumblr accounts - and also the official website we created for this story.

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><p>How to Train Your Dragon II
>The Dragon Whisperer

****Prologue****

****That Killer****

Her white fur cape waved gently in the wind from the coming storm. She leaned out, over the edge of the ship, looked out onto the vast volcano that speared upward so black and dark and broken. She watched the people, scurrying obliviously about, carrying out what little task they made for themselves on the island, their dragons seemingly, amazingly aiding them. Her eyes rose. There it was, the black dragon, the Night Fury, the great prize of the sky, sweeping above the shore, and upon him, the boy. There he was, the Dragon Whisperer, as the stories called him. Her eyes narrowed. There he was, that killer.

2. Chapter 1: Induction

a/n: My sister and I haven't been in the fandom long, but this story we came up with really inspired us, and now we want to share it with the rest of the How to Train Your Dragon fans. It's an illustrated webnovel, so there are images to go with every chapter. I'm cross-posting this story to my deviantArt and Tumblr accounts - and also the official website we created for this story. Please check out one of these for the images:

>.com ((slash)) gallery ((slash)) 38855965
.com

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><p>How to Train Your Dragon II
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****Chapter 1**
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****Induction****

A blast careened him in the saddle. Hiccup yelled at the thrill as Toothless swung up and into a dizzying cartwheel, the fireball he spat out roaring horizontally below him and into the wide bottom of the great volcano. "Yeah, baby!" Hiccup yelled, breathless at the wild loss of gravity and the swirl of wind, his eyes catching glimpses of Toothless' blue fire gnawing at the rocky foundation, the boulders crashing down, boring a hole into the mountain. A cheer went up from below, as hundreds of Vikings streamed into the newly-bored hole, picks and shovels and huge lumbering baskets in their big hulking hands. Hiccup smiled, leveled off in the bright gray sky.

This is my tribe. And that-

Toothless turned his head up, tried to see him.

That is my best friend. His name's Toothless, and I discovered him a while back, quite eventfully as it turned out. There's no one more happy than I am that the war between us and dragons is long over.

He patted Toothless and the dragon shook his head in delight. A sudden swoosh of wings went by him, blue and red and green. "Hey, nice one, Hiccup!" screamed Snotlout as he rode by on his flaming red Monstrous Nightmare. "Maybe a stunt like that'll get you points at Induction!"

Hiccup rolled his eyes, shouted back with a smile, "You better get back at what you're supposed to do!"

"Hey, I can take a joy ride once in a while, can't I?" the burly teen retorted, flapping away.

That's Snotlout. Don't pay attention to what he says. It's usually sarcastic.

A two-headed Zippleback swept by, carrying two arguing teens.

That's Ruffnut and Tuffnut, the twins. I think they really love each other. It just doesn't look like it offhand, so don't tell them you know.

Toothless suddenly got it into his mind to chase them. "Whoa!" Hiccup squealed, laughing as Toothless veered along behind the wily Zippleback. The twins looked back, shared a naughty eye together and drove their ride downward.

"All right, Toothless, you better hold off. Don't want to irk Ruff and Tuff." Toothless glanced back at him, jerked his head with a smile and sailed up. After they had raced each other that last time, Tuffnut promised to even the score. Hiccup glanced down, saw them swoop over the volcano's rocky shore. Yeah, he didn't exactly feel like winning again today.

A bulky round Gronkle zipped under them suddenly, ridden by an equally round teen, who waved up at Hiccup with a gleeful smile. Hiccup waved back.

That's Fishlegs. We call him the dragon encyclopedia. Most of us would get bored by all that geekiness, but not me. He's actually a lot of fun.

"Kids!" called a voice from below. "Get back to your jobs!" Hiccup looked down, saw the huge Viking, his yellow braided beard flapping in exasperation and his hook hand punching the sky. "I'm _not_ a babysitter!"

Hiccup laughed.

That's Gobber, the blacksmith with interchangeable hands. You remember him. He's the best, except when he's got you not going at things properly. That's when you better watch out.

The twins rolled their eyes, Snotlout pouted, as they descended to their chores. It always made his heart warm to see the dragons help so happily with the village tasks. There were couriers and climbers, loaders and lifters. A lot of hard work. He watched Fishlegs balance precariously on his dragon (affectionately named Meatlug) as they hauled rocks on the shore. Hiccup patted Toothless, pleased. At least all he had to do was blast the mountainside with Toothless' awesome firepower. He smiled.

Yeah... my job is so much cooler.

I just had to say that.

Hiccup swung around, met a colorful blue dragon that squawked at the near collision. "Astrid!" he exclaimed, smiling at the slender girl mounted on her.

"Hey, Hiccup!" She smiled, winking at him.

That's Astrid. On Stormfly.

Astrid...

He watched her small figure swoop low towards the busy quarrying, her braided hair trailing her, her thin arms firm against her Deadly Nadder.

Ah. Astrid.

Toothless jerked suddenly. Hiccup turned and looked ahead, saw a huge rock pillar in front of him. "Gah!" He pulled up, sent Toothless into a vertical soar, exhaled sharply. Toothless slapped him with his ear flaps. "Sorry, buddy," he said, his cheeks stinging.

Toothless shook his head, sailed flat again. He clicked his tongue, eyed Hiccup from the corner of his big green eyes. Hiccup pushed Toothless' head away. "Okay, I get it." He smiled, looked back at Stormfly, now firing the smelter, and up ahead again. He turned Toothless and swooped down towards the shore. Toothless spread his wings, wide and black around him, swept over the Viking ships, past Fishlegs heaving stones to and fro on Meatlug, past Snotlout scaling the cliffsides on Hookfang, past the twins ferrying Vikings between ships, shore, and caves, past the structure where Gobber eyed small pieces by hand, a tiny magnifying glass attached to his arm, past the innumerable crowds clanging at rocks and tiptoeing around hot

metal.

_Yup, this is my tribe. We're mining out Dragon Island, if you haven't noticed. My dad, Chief of the tribe, he's the one there telling everybody what to do--

A huge Viking swung his red beard and shouted at the streams of people heaving rocks to and fro. He looked up and waved at his son soaring by. Hiccup nodded his head.

Yeah, he thought it would be a great idea to see what undiscovered boulders might be inside the volcano. One of those Quests, you know, that we get on once in a while. Well, it's a good thing the mountain didn't blow - yet. I'd hate to see all of us riding lava flows. Of course now we're really going to have to hold our breaths on that, because a few months ago, I just had to go build some new ship based on the new lightweight metal he found. Aaaand now we're all back finding more metal. I think he wants to build a whole fleet of them. I really should keep my sketchbook shut.

Hiccup eyed the volcano.

Yeah, I'm holding my breath on that one.

Toothless swept lower. Hiccup veered him to the ground, landed next to Gobber and the little portable structure with the leather umbrella over it. Hiccup jumped off Toothless, went to talk to Gobber a bit. The wind caught one of the umbrella's panels, pushing down just as Hiccup got there. He pushed it up, wondered if the thing was going to snap one of these days. "Hey, Gobber, how are things going?"

Gobber jumped, his tall Viking helmet bobbing on his head. "Hiccup! Don't I have enough surprises today?"

"What, I surprised you?"

Gobber rolled his eyes, flipped a tiny glimmering stone behind him.

"Hey, what was that?" Hiccup stepped towards it.

"Nothing, Hiccup, worthless junk."

Hiccup picked it off the dust-laden ground.

"You'd better quit the naturalism a bit, Hiccup." Gobber's voice was getting louder, as sharp rock-splitting exploded in the air. "All them rocks and trees ain't goin' to help at Induction _or_ your future."

Hiccup sighed, tumbled the glittering crystal in his hand. What was it, only three days from now? Induction. That was the one thing about being the Chief's son. Everyone wanted to make you Chief. Well, Induction was a part of that. His eighteenth birthday, the whole ceremony thing, test of responsibilities. He didn't exactly look forward to chairing a seat on his dad's Council of pillaging warriors and advisors, but what could he do?

Gobber went back to chipping at the rocks on his table. Hiccup rolled the faceted black pebble in his palm, walked up to Gobber. The wind

changed suddenly. Gobber looked up. "Storm's coming. I guess that means we'll have a short work day."

"Hm," Hiccup hummed. He looked up at the growing storm clouds, the sharpness in the wind hitting him. The horizon suddenly lighted with a faint, ethereal glow. The horizon grew dotted with black shapes. He could sense Gobber stiffen. Hiccup stood taller on his toes, noticed the darker shapes forming on the edge of the sea, their black sails vibrating. There was an odd glow under them this time. He never saw _that_ before.

He felt a heavy presence behind him. He turned, saw his father, gazing out at the sea. "Son," his father laid a hand on him, his eyes still analyzing the ships so far away. "I think they're ready for you on the east side of the mountain. Go do that."

"But Dad, it _won't_ take that long." He gestured frantically. "One quick fly over to check on them and I'd be back."

His father looked down at him, sternly.

"I mean, shouldn't we do _something_?" They'd been through this conversation beforeâ€¦

"No, son," his father said firmly. "There's something bad about those ships, I can feel it in my bones."

Hiccup slumped. Fourth time, same answer. What was he waiting for?

His father sighed. "And I don't want you going near them." He let his hand off Hiccup. "That's final, you understand?"

Hiccup stared at the gravel under his feet. "Sure, Dad," he said quietly.

"Now, you run along and help the others. These ships are our job."

Hiccup slipped out from under the umbrella, graveled along until he found Toothless and mounted him.

So much for pre-Chief responsibilities

3. Chapter 2: I Wish You Could Tell Me

a/n: I'm really proud of the illustration I made for this chapter. I'm really growing in the art of digital painting! Enjoy the chapter, everyone!

View the illustration at the official webpage. Put a period where the dashes are: [howtotrainyourdragon2 - thecomicseries - com](http://howtotrainyourdragon2-thecomicseries-com)
>or at my deviantArt gallery: [inhonoredglory - deviantart - gallery - 38855965](http://inhonoredglory-deviantart-gallery-38855965)<p>

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><p>How to Train Your Dragon II
>The Dragon Whisperer

****Chapter 2**

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****I Wish You Could Tell Me**

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Hiccup leaned down on Toothless, winged east. He looked back a moment, at the growing black specks on the waves afar. His lips pursed; he aimed at the prepared location, prepared for the blast. But his mind wasn't in it. Toothless let out the blue plasma with a vibration that shook Hiccup's body to its core. He shivered, watched the fire curl viscously into the clefts of the rock, burrowing into the shadows. The mountain groaned as the rocks fell. Toothless screeched in excitement, whipped his head from side to side, attempted to cartwheel again, but Hiccup kept his heel flat on the stirrup. He didn't feel like doing tricks right now. Toothless hummed a prodding moan.

"I'm sorry, buddy."

Toothless swept quieter above the volcano, hovered gently. A soft breeze, noticeable now in the suspension, brushed Hiccup's cheek. He looked up into the wind, saw the ships afar amassing, the mute glow of lightning behind them, the strange lights playing under them, the underwater lightsâ€¦ foreign creatures?

Suddenly a sharper flash of lightning sparked the air near one of the ships. And what was that? A flying shape in the sky near the lightning, a splash of water from below. He could barely see it, off on the horizon, so far away. He squinted. It couldn't be a water dragonâ€¦ They were so rare around Berk, not at the size where he could see its splash from here. But it could beâ€¦ or if not, then what?

He urged Toothless forward a bit, felt the heave of the dragon's shoulders under him. If he could just get a bit closer, see what that was. The sky was darkening suddenly, and windy. A gale cut through Hiccup's hair sharply. He grimaced. The air shifted directions, pushed them forward from behind, howled as rolls of cloud boiled above them. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea. He turned around and looked back. Dragon Island looked a little small right now and pretty soon he'd be over the ships and Dad said he shouldn't, soâ€¦
"Toothless, we'd better-"

Lightning. Crash. Toothless veered down, felt the energy dangerously close. Hiccup screeched. A swoop of wings flashed by. He turned, slapped the sharp hair away from his eyes. Toothless growled suddenly towards the flying shape that came at them. The shape opened its wings and screamed. He finally saw it: purple, white, narrow snout, screaming teeth, blue and purple light running up and down his spiked wings - the Skrill.

The shape in the lightning now made sense.

The Skrill swooped down, skimmed past Toothless with a wild passion, screeching something hot and demonic, shards of light ripping through his black wings. Hiccup gasped, the mental buzz of the lightning too close and too sharp. Toothless' body hardened under him and he screamed, rolled wildly to avoid the sharp wings lit with light.

Thunder crashed around them, the atmosphere shrieking in its wake. The storm was rising. Toothless fought the air, a sucking swirl catching him suddenly. Wind whirled. Hiccup sensed something wrong, the air swirling, sucking them downward. Hiccup pulled up on Toothless, found water splashing on his face suddenly. Rain? It choked him suddenly, and he opened his eyes, gulped seawater, and saw the blurry black of the ocean. Toothless wailed, pushed his wings out and upward, splashing out of the waves with a gasping beat. Hiccup grabbed Toothless' neck, fought the hot stinging in his lungs, tried to focus.

That scream came back. Hiccup looked around, only heard it. Toothless stiffened again, his shoulders firm. "Toothless, what's wrong?" He put a hand on him. Toothless raised his wings, heaved them down and shot forward across the waves. "Toothless!" Hiccup shrieked, the power reeling him.

Toothless hissed, stopped suddenly mid-air before the Skrill, just above the water. Lightning suddenly crackled on the Skrill's wings. The dragons eyed each other. Toothless jabbed forward, flapped his mighty wings before the Skrill, roared at him with a boom that was muted only by the storm's thunder that cracked above them. The Skrill flashed a spiked wing and came at Toothless. Hiccup yelled, saw the fire in that dragon's small round eyes, tried to get Toothless away. But Toothless wasn't listening, wanted to stay and fight the lightning dragon. "Toothless!" Hiccup screamed.

And then the earth rocked- a sound, a terrific rolling boom. Hiccup's head shot back and forth. Where was it?_ What was it?_ The water vibrated under him, the sky shook. Hiccup pulled his hands off Toothless' harness, covered his ears, opened his mouth and tried to stop, _stop_ the unearthly roar. It was- killing him. He buried his head into Toothless.

And then it stopped. Hiccup gasped.

A deep groan vibrated from below. The Skrill let out a wail, flapped away suddenly. The sky darkened. Toothless' head perked, glanced downward suddenly. A great wide shape rose up, out of the sea, nudged the top of the water. Its shape continued to rise out of the water, its back continued to ridge long, long across the waves. The glowing seaweed tendrils flowing from his head, the teeth jutting from his bottom lip, jagged and thin, the small fins, running down his back, the line of glowing lights, across its side. Hiccup inhaled suddenly, realized the great beast was even larger than the one he'd fought two years ago. It wasn't even in the Dragon Book, this great tidal beast, this Great Dragon.

The Dragon blinked the three lids of his glowing green eyes, raised his pupils to look up at dragon and boy. Hiccup felt a wash of nerves consume him, blinked at the light from those eyes. Toothless screeched, but it was not fear. It was, it was joy.

Toothless swept down to him. "Toothless-" The great creature throatied something low and deep, let the light out of his mouth, looked at Toothless. The eyes glowed brighter suddenly, stronger, a mix of yellow in them now. Toothless flapped, hovered near the waves, near the dragon's great head, bobbed his little head up and down, squealing with delight. The Great Dragon hummed gently at Toothless, nudged his great snout up lightly, gently blinked his eyes.

Hiccup tried to understand. "Toothless?"

Toothless flew yet lower, his long wings nearly touching the Great Dragon's head. Hiccup glanced into the huge eyes, eyes several persons tall, looked away before he was blinded. How could they have not seen such a creature before? Why did Toothless want to communicate? He held on tighter to the strap around Toothless' neck, waited for his friend to make the next decision.

Toothless was still looking at the dragon, mouthing phrases, then he jerked his head back to Hiccup, a loving lilt in his eye and a warm hum in his throat. The Great Dragon followed Toothless' gaze, set his huge eyes on Hiccup. Somehow it felt like he was being showed off, maybe, or presented. Hiccup cringed, turned his head down, could feel the great beast blink when the yellow light basking his body faded a moment. He touched the side of Toothless' head. "Toothless, I-uh."

The dragons hummed and throated at each other, the Great Dragon's groan large and heavy. Hiccup squinted and looked up. Toothless jerked his head in the direction of Berk and he lilted a sound, flapping up, into the storm. The rain misted greater on Hiccup's face. Toothless looked back at the Great Dragon, hummed lightly and flapped up, sloping into the clouds and dark and rain. Hiccup looked back, watched the glow of that dragon's eyes disappear into the sea, the roiling water swirling to the suction of his descent. He looked forward, wiped the pelting sheets of water from his eyes.

"Toothless, what was that all about?"

Toothless leaned his head back, hummed.

"You know, sometimes I wish you could talk."

Toothless smirked, gave Hiccup a jolt upward with his shoulders. Hiccup caught his balance. "Okay, buddy, I take that back."

Toothless hummed contentedly.

But he really wished Toothless could tell him.

4. Chapter 3: He's Not Ready

a/n: I hope you enjoy the update! Thanks for reading. :)

View the illustration at the official webpage. Put a period where the dashes are: [howtotrainyourdragon2 - thecomicseries - com](http://howtotrainyourdragon2-thecomicsseries-com)
>or at my deviantArt gallery: [inhonoredglory - deviantart - gallery - 38855965](http://inhonoredglory-deviantart-gallery-38855965)<p>

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><p>How to Train Your Dragon II
>The Dragon Whisperer

Chapter 3

****He's Not Ready****

Hiccup tried to orient himself, the wind and endless sky and the growing fog on the sea making him dizzy. "Toothless, we got to get back," he said, closing his eyes a moment.

Toothless nudged his head upward, and turned his right wing up. Hiccup let the stirrup loose, kept the prosthetic tail open and let Toothless guide. The dragon banked to the left, sweeping lower, flapped.

Hiccup let the rain wash his face. Those dragons... Who were they? He looked at Toothless. Toothless knew them, both of them - and that great dragon. It's like he knew him... intimately. Dragons lived, what was it? Years, decades, even hundreds of years, the books said. How long ago was it, then, that Toothless knew him? He pursed his lips, didn't like the feeling of not knowing. He had to warn the tribe not to scare at the big dragon, whenever Toothless met him at Berk, as he was sure they had arranged. I wonder when...

Hiccup looked up, squinted in the rain, saw something jab out of the fog. A mast, a sail. Hiccup rose slightly. The ships. They'd gone that far out at sea. The fog lowered around the mast, as the great sail pushed through the cloud. Hiccup tried to see through the mist. There were more of them.

Much more.

Toothless lowered suddenly into the fog, sensing his thoughts. And then he saw.

The ships. Hiccup paused, inhaled long and slowly. They stretched for miles, brown broken sails fighting against the storm, dirty barnacled hulls heaving to the sigh of the sea, black flags lined with red, pulling long in the gales. The tall silhouettes of weapons and catapults heaving on the decks. The growing sound of men, shouting, order and commands, the strength of their screams far away and faint in the buffer of wind and rain. And under them, the glowing lights. Alive, playful. Luminescence from a hundred water dragons. His eyes danced over the glow. He'd never seen them in such a number before, the lilting creatures. Toothless hummed, viewing the scene with interest. There was something about the schools of water dragons that made most of their flying cousins think poorly of them. Perhaps the weakness of their wings, the fact that some of them can fly only a few feet off the surface of the sea, the fact that so many of them lived off the refuse of ships. The dragons slowly descended into the stormy seas, inconstant hints of green and white light remaining. No wonder there were so many here, with ships in that number. He leaned towards the vision, Toothless' wings curved gently around him, turning.

The ships heaved heavily in the gust, creaking like living creatures. He watched, amazed. One ship emerged from the mass behind it, its sail marked uniquely, and its shape, a kind of nostalgic majesty. The flagship, he realized, its body wide and long, once ornate, its gilded frame now broken and scraped, the strength of its mast worn by decay. The hulking figures running to and fro across its deck, and a slow one, large and lumbering, gazing out slowly into the sea, an air of authority in him, a gleaming curved sword dangling from his waist,

his red, graying, braided hair flitting in the wind. Hiccup almost gasped. "Down, Toothless," he coached, "just a little." He looked closer at the man, realized what it was that intrigued him.

He looked so much like Dad.

Toothless looked back at him, aware of something, hovered gently in the rising mist and lowering storm clouds. "Dad doesn't have a twin, does he?" Hiccup whispered, patting Toothless' ear flaps and smiling, when he suddenly realized there was someone in his father's past. There was a brother before his grandmother died and Stoick's father married again. But he was... what was it? Banished? He couldn't even remember the man's name anymore.

Hiccup looked down again, figured it was just someone who looked like his father.

The man was speaking to someone standing next to him, a thinner adult, bare-headed, gray-haired. They parted and the old man weaved his way up to the fore of the ship, up past the barrels and glinting chests on the deck, past the piles of rope and the gleaming axes, up to the upper platform near the bow, up to the yet smaller figure commanding her voice across the ship. It was a girl, just a girl. A swash of white flapping behind her. He looked closer, thought he read her face, maybe a look of defiance, conviction. She swung her head, sent her black unbraided hair slapping across her face. Her head turned up. His mind snapped, Toothless jerked upward, and Hiccup realized she saw them. He peered back, saw her face follow them as they raced to the end of the armada. The sky was blacker now.

He didn't want to go back just yet. Let the awe of the silent groaning ships sink into him. "Wow," he whispered. His eye latched onto a thin little water dragon, just smaller than Toothless, a translucent pair of rounded wings on either side of him. The dragon leaped up out of the water, flashing its green, glowing sides, plunged back in and advanced towards one of the ships near the back of the armada. It halted by the hull, expectant, and Hiccup looked, saw two burly Vikings haul refuse over the edge, eagerly captured by the little dragon and a dozen other companions. They consumed the floating debris and descended, the deep, dark water swallowing away the last of their light.

The two Vikings hustled back. Hiccup pushed Toothless a little more forward. Why did they walk with such difficulty? He squinted and realized. The chains around their necks. His brows raised. Something from the old stories came back, something he saw when they explored the islands around them, the other tribes, the way they worked. Berk didn't have them, didn't trade them, yet there was still that feeling when you saw them. Criminals, usually. The conquered. The two Vikings put the huge barrel down, looked up at the sky with eyes that probed deep and somehow evil.

Slaves.

Hiccup instinctively turned Toothless away. Why was he afraid? "Toothless, let's go home, okay... buddy?" He looked back, saw those Vikings, felt his heart feel sorry, his mind spark with fear, his soul confused.

Toothless hummed, sensed the discord. Hiccup stroked him, said

nothing. So these people were slave traders. He swallowed. Dad didn't say very much about his opinion of slaves, and when he did, it was mostly with spitting irony, how the villains among them now have their comeuppance. Rain overcame him and he closed his eyes, lay his head on Toothless' neck, trusted his motions, heeled the stirrup gently. The rain soaked into his clothing, started to make him feel cold.

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He gazed impatiently up at the sky, trying to find the black speck of his son's ride appear from the clouds. His boy, Hiccup. The child was so much trouble, especially now with Induction coming. Why did he have to go disappear now? He pictured his dear Valhallarama. He thought of her a lot, mostly when Hiccup was stumbling again. He got that feeling she'd know how to take care of him, how to relate to him.

"The others have all cast off," said a voice behind him.

Stoick turned, folded up the image of his departed wife. "Good," he said. They had to leave, with the storm at hand.

Spitelout nodded, descended the short upper plateau at the fore of the ship, and stepped towards the stern. Gobber came up behind him, hobbling on his peg leg and smiling weirdly. "Anchor's all ready, just say the word," he huffed, then sighed. "That's one thing storms are great for - tellin' ya it's time to rest yer weary bones and go home." He jabbed a hooked hand at him. "Light a warm, cozy fire, settle down to a good leg of lamb and _sleep_. Ahh."

Stoick smiled through his crinkled beard. Gobber had this way of amusing him. He looked back up at the swirling clouds.

Gobber followed his gaze. "Ya want me to tell one of the kids to go find him?"

"There still some dragons here?"

Gobber sniffed. "I guess that crazy boom did seem to set them off."

Stoick hummed.

"But Stormfly's still here." Gobber made a noise, like he was trying to unchoke something. "Uh." He cleared his throat. "You want me to send Astrid?"

Stoick faced him. It was true, Hiccup had flatly disobeyed him. Just when they needed his expertise, too, to explain that monstrous boom. They all agreed it was something about dragons. What else would keep Hiccup out there for this long?

At least that was the general excuse.

But even if it was a dragon, Hiccup still had a responsibility. There was no more time for games and exploration. And I'm not going to be giving orders to a child in three days.

He shook his head at Gobber. "He'll be back soon," he said. Give the

boy a chance to return on his own, see his own folly.

"Ya don't seem very confident in that..." Gobber mumbled.

"He'll be back," Stoick said firmly.

"Hm," Gobber picked his tooth, sauntered to the edge of the ship. "Ya know what yer thinkin'."

Stoick eyed him, tried not to let his old friend know. Gobber had been training Hiccup for months on war and leadership, and he didn't want to hurt his pride.

But Gobber was not stupid. "Yer thinkin' he's not ready," he said, quite seriously.

Stoick sighed, lumbered slowly to join him on the edge of the ship, facing the great boiling expanse of sea and sky. He stared flatly for a moment, let the sharp wind prick his cheeks. Sometimes he wondered what went through his son's mind. Did the boy even think about what was coming in a few days? For hundreds of years, the eighteenth year meant manhood, admission into the Chief's War Council. Stoick wanted him to be ready. He wanted to trust him.

But he didn't.

Gobber nudged him. "So what yer gonna say when he gets back?"

Stoick didn't respond. He'd had those words planned a long time, turned them over in his head as he watched his son climb up to his room at home, when he played with Toothless, when he was sleeping and Stoick would watch him from the doorway, the moonlight falling on his small, youthful face. Those words. It was saying them that was the question. Maybe if he told him, truthfully, his boy would think more about what he was facing, maybe he'd take it seriously. A flash caught his eye above and he and Gobber each turned their faces skyward. The flash was black and winged.

"I guess ya better think fast." Gobber sighed and hopped onto the lower deck of the ship.

Stoick inhaled and stepped down.

5. Chapter 4: A Daughter's Love

a/n: With schooling upon me, I might have to start making once-a-week posts, on Mondays. I know I'm a tad late with this post, but hey it's still Thursday! :)

View the illustration at the official webpage. Put a period where the dashes are: [howtotrainyourdragon2 - thecomicseries - com](http://howtotrainyourdragon2-thecomicseries-com)
>or at my deviantArt gallery: [inhonoredglory - deviantart - gallery - 38855965](http://inhonoredglory-deviantart-gallery-38855965)<p>

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><p>How to Train Your Dragon II
>The Dragon Whisperer

****Chapter 4**

>

****A Daughter's Love**

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The wind whipped through her hair, smacking her face. She looked back down from the sky, her heart simmering at the sight of that black beast and its rider. She flinched. Oh, how she hated him. She willed her fired heart to calm, for how else could she command the ship? She put her hand on the bow, ran her fingers on the wood. She'd never seen him before in her entire life. She peeked up again, saw the black shape disappear into the storm, her eyes wavered. She wondered how such a stranger could consume her so completelyâ€¦ so passionately. She looked down the ship, at her father, hobbling on the deck, that look in his eye. That look which had never left him since he found her so many years ago, that emptiness, that pain, the bouts of insanity that struck him at night and in his dreams.

That was why.

She tightened her grip on her personal sword, the one just smaller than her father's glorious saber. Her eyes narrowed and she inhaled. How she longed for the day she could run its blade through that boy's heart.

Ohâ€¦

Hervi suddenly cleared his throat before her. "Master?" he spoke, knowing he was intruding on deep thoughts.

She shook her head of its ponderings, looked at him. "Herviâ€¦ what is it?"

"Your father wants to advance to Berk."

She sighed, exasperated. "_Why?_"

"The Master did not say." Hervi shifted his weight, shook his gray-haired head inadvertently. A spasm of age.

She whipped her bear's cape into her right hand, gathered it. "I'll have to see him." She stepped down from the upper platform by the bow, stopped in front of Hervi. "Did you get word from the rear ships?"

"Oh, yes. They've confirmed it. A dragon. A very large one caused the boom."

"Mm," she hummed, put that information into one of the categories in her mind. So many things to think about, so many things to considerâ€¦ She put a hand to her forehead.

"Heather?" Hervi whispered.

She looked up. "Not now, Hervi. I need to speak with Dad."

Hervi quieted, got that look in his eye like he was holding back advice, thoughts. This mission had made him jumpy recently, more than all the raiding expeditions of before. Somehow she wondered if his

loyalty was going to be broken. But he has no one to go to. She put the thought out of her mind.

She looked ahead, at her father, his large, yet weakening form marching to the stern of the ship, the curved sword hanging from his waist, walking towards the far end, the glistening helmet on his head, black and obsidian, made of wild dragon scales, and the white bear's cape that she feared was getting too large and too heavy now for his back to carry.

She reached him. "Dad? Why should we advance to Berk now? We talked about this before."

His fired eyes gazed at her. "I'm tired of waiting so long."

"But it's only three days now until his Induction."

He grunted impatiently. "For two years they've gotten away with it. I should've found out earlier, I should have- but now it's almost too late. I don't, can'tâ€¦" He started mumbling, and Heather stepped forward quickly, knew this could be the start of another attack of the mind. "Dad, Dad!" She looked into his eyes. "It's _not_ too late-"

He gazed at her suddenly, dark and seriously, that spasm gone, cold reason in his eyes. "Heather, you know I'm dying."

"You're not," she whispered.

"And when Stoick hears about it," he continued deftly, ignoring her, "he'll think he's won again."

"He's not going to win."

He gazed down, the passion of hate and bitterness festering inside of him making his body slump and sigh. Heather smarted, hated seeing him destroyed like this, hated the toll of eighteen years, and the sharp lethal news they'd so recently received that his brother's son was no more the cursed offspring he should always be. She looked into his eyes, tried to distract them. "Dad. I know we've found out about this whole mess two years late, but that doesn't mean we can't still do something now."

He lilted a sigh, not believing her.

"Dad, it's true. You're not going to die like you think you are."

"That last battle?" His eyes were clear again, matter-of-factly. "You know what it did to me."

"Of course I know," she whispered, rose her voice with that conviction again, needed him to believe her. "But life is not in your body, Dad, it's in your mind. You're going to live, this will make you _live_."

He looked at her again, considered her words, stood looking at her a while, the wind flowing gently through his graying beard, the lightning afar casting glints of purple on the dragon scales of his helmet, the dark shadows on his face from the storm that still raged

above them. "I've never seen myself when my mindâ€|"

Her brows crossed. "Don't talk about it." She hugged him, looked up to his face.

He patted a big hand on her back, pressed the bear's cape into her long black hair. "What if they never call on us, like we planned?"

"They will. I can feel it. What they did to you on Stoick's Induction, the comeuppance now. Fate has to be on our side. They will come."

He set her eyes on her, smiled gently. "You're always so confident, soâ€| sure. Just like your mother."

She smiled, knew what that meant in his eyes.

He reached into his big belt suddenly. The metal wrap was too heavy for him in his condition, she knew, but he was still chief and he had pride. He took out a round stone carving, handed it to her. "I want you to have it."

"I can't."

He took her hand and placed it there, looked at her with that pride again. "It's true, you're not my daughter by birth, everyone knows that. But you are in my heart, and therefore, what is mine is rightfully yours, and she is yours as well."

She looked down at the smoothed flat stone. The delicate etching on it, marks lovingly laid down by hands that were once strong and proud. She looked at the image, the carved curls of hair on her long face, the smile that shone brightly, even in stone.

If only she had met her.

She looked up at her father, his face calm, his breathing steady. She glanced up at the sky, the clouds roiled by the lightning and gales, churning the sea, drowning the light of the sun. She felt his arms caress her softly and she pressed her body gently into his large frame. Words of love ran through her mind. But they had pride and she left them unsaid. But she knew, she felt, he was saying them, too. She closed her eyes, felt his warmth against the storm

6. Chapter 5: You'll Never Get It

a/n: I enjoyed making the illustration for this chapter (HTTYD is sure making me expand my art skills!). The chapter was also very interesting to write. I hope you enjoy this Monday's update.

View the illustration at the official webpage. Put a period where the dashes are: [howtotrainyourdragon2 - thecomicseries - com](http://howtotrainyourdragon2-thecomicseries-com)
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><p>How to Train Your Dragon II

>The Dragon Whisperer

**Chapter 5

>

**You'll Never Get It

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Hiccup glided down on Toothless, noticed the windy vacancy of the shore. The wind howled in his ears and lightning fragments caught the corners of his eye. No doubt they'd all gone home for the storm. He saw the lone flagship's great sail reeling gently in the gales, the ship beached on the shallow shorewater. His father was pacing the platform near the bow of the ship. _Dad, waiting for me. Man, what a mess I am-_

"Hiccup!" It was Astrid's voice, behind him.

He whirled, pulled Toothless up.

"Hiccup!" She was breathless, irritated, her little arms pounding her dragon impatiently. He was almost captivated again, the scowl on her face making her look so, ah, _beautiful_.

"Where _were_ you?" she screamed above the gales.

Okay. He snapped out of it. So this didn't look very good. "Aaaah." He thanked the wind for suddenly flapping his hair over his eyes.

"You can't go running around leaving us in the dark." Her voice was amazingly strong in the storm. "You're not chief _yet_, you know," she boomed.

He cringed. He never liked the sound of "chief" and him in the same sentence. He upped his brows and sighed. "Sorry?"

"I had to keep your dad from thinking you were lost," she snapped, riding Stormfly dangerously near him.

So they were really gone that long. "I wasn't lost," he said, honestly wondering if she could hear him.

"_And_ I had to keep Stormfly from flying off. Did you know there's been a scare back here?"

Hiccup raised his brows. "What happened?"

"That horrific boom made the dragons run - or fly, to be precise. Stormfly's terrified."

Hiccup looked at the blue dragon, saw its wings shaking slightly, its eyes darting to and fro. He remembered the fear in the Skrill's eyes. The Great Dragon.

"Stormfly, it's okay," he tried to soothe. Toothless glared up at him. _Yeah, I know, wasting my breath trying to talk normally in this wind._

"You heard the boom," she screamed, matter-of-factly.

"Well, yes."

"Then what was it? Is there a tsunami we don't know about?"

"No, Astrid, it was a water dragon. His roar-" The wind blew up suddenly.

"What?"

He looked down, at his father's ship on the edge of the island. He was gesturing to him largely, with one of those "grounded" looks, except worse. "My dad's calling, Astrid" he said flatly.

"He's gonna grill you, Hiccup," she screamed, with as much of a tone of sympathy as could be expressed in the catching wind.

Hiccup sighed, figured he should have expected something like this. Hiccup turned Toothless up, banked to dive down. Astrid pursued him, banking Stormfly. Toothless flapped down, sinking through the air, hovering over the long ship.

"Son!" His father's voice came through the storm.

"Yeah, Dad?"

His father waved a huge hand at him, irritated. "Get off that dragon and come down and talk to me."

Hiccup swallowed, urged Toothless to the shore. Toothless whimpered. "It's all right, bud, it's my fault anyway." Toothless landed gently. Hiccup slid off slowly, his prosthetic left leg sinking into the soft sand. He sensed Astrid landing next to him, and saw her run up to join him in the walk to his dad's ship.

He smiled at her. "Moral support?"

She smirked. "More like I still haven't heard what happened out there yet. And your dad is going to get it out of you."

Hiccup grimaced. "I thought you were supposed to be nice to me now."

She giggled, punched him lightly in the shoulder. "Of course it's moral support."

Hiccup sighed, trudged forward. "So which is it?"

She rubbed his shoulder, said nothing.

He looked at her, the playful eyes, the cheesy smile that spelled the death of all the fancy quips he could have thrown at her.

He was just getting happy when he reached the gangplank that led up to his father's great Drakkar. Gobber was strolling down to the edge of it, holding his good hand out to them.

Hiccup stepped back, let Astrid go first. She smiled silently and got herself up the plank. Gobber came back for Hiccup and they balanced their way onto the deck. "Yer father has some words for ya, young

man," Gobber whispered, pointing to the far end of the ship, where his father paced from one side to another.

Hiccup nodded, took a deep breath and advanced, walking over the ropes and pulleys and random knots, past the sea chests and the crew, who looked at him in that funny way they'd been doing ever since Induction got into the everyday vocabulary around Berk. He shied down, tried to hurry forward and get it over with. As he advanced, the crew melted away behind him. He got that alone feeling as he crossed the last half of the ship, vacant rowing benches on either side of him. _Dad must have told them to give us space to talk. Which means Astrid was right... This wasn't any public conversation._

He reached the edge of the deck that rose up slightly, and stopped in the shadow of his father, looked up into the bright green eyes and bustling red beard.

"Well, Hiccup, what do you have to say for yourself?"

Hiccup swallowed suddenly, heard the slap of the sea against the ship's hull. He could read his dad's eyes, the hot fire of accusation in them. A shiver ran down Hiccup's spine. "I didn't mean to," he said, quietly, forcefully.

His father's shoulders heaved down in a sigh. "Hiccup, how many times do I have to tell you? How many times does it take to get it into your head? _Not the ships_."

"But Dad-"

"You might know dragons, but I know people-" His voice was rising, getting hot. "-and I _know_ there's something dangerous with that lot."

"Dad-"

"Then that great boom, which horrified our dragons. You're the expert. Where were you when we-"

"But, Dad!" Hiccup raised his hands desperately. "-now we know something about the ships and I wasn't gone that-"

"_Son!_" Stoick's voice boomed viciously, and he glared at Hiccup. "You _stop_ interrupting."

Hiccup caught his breath.

His father leaned down towards him, put his hand out determinedly. "A leader gives orders because he _expects_ them to be followed. By his _own_ _son_ of all people."

Hiccup flinched, stopped looking at him.

"What kind of an example are you giving to your tribe, Hiccup? What kind of a precedent is that?"

Hiccup opened his mouth, wondered if he could say anything at all that would deflect the truth. He put his head down, studied his boot vaguely.

He felt his father clear his throat, sigh in that heavy way like he'd just released something that had been festering in his mind a long time. "Son," the big voice began, steadied itself, "in three days you're going to be a part of my Council. You'll be at every meeting of war or exploration we have. You'll be called upon and trusted by the best of my men. You'll be an equal."

A shiver raced up Hiccup's neck.

He felt his father step down to the lower deck and put his hand on his shoulder. "Look at me, son."

Hiccup raised his eyes warily.

His father swooshed the fringe of hair from Hiccup's face. "I want you to realize that you're going to be a man, Hiccup. Think about that. And if you don't prepare yourself now..." He put both hands on Hiccup's shoulders, took a deep breath. "...you won't be ready." Hiccup felt the wind rush out of him. Those last words came out more like a statement of fact than a warning. It's not like he cared so much that he was ready by the Council's standards or able to wield a sword like his ancestors or get his name into the fables. But that pain in Dad's eyes... _This meant so much to him... so much, and he doesn't think I'm ready._ "Dad?"

But he wasn't listening, he was looking afar off, out into the sea. "Induction Day is happening whether you can take it or not." He was almost talking to himself now. "That's the point of it. Makes a man of you." He snapped back, looked at Hiccup. He took his hands off his shoulders. "Do you understand what I am saying?"

Hiccup inhaled, figured he'd better start making some changes. Induction was only a one day event and then it'd be over, right? He sighed. That was the catch, manhood _wasn't_ a one-time thing. War and fighting and orders and troops. Making judgments and heralding the tribespeople. All your life long. At least, that's what Dad's vision of it was. His fingers started twisting themselves around his harness strap.

"Hiccup?" his father came again.

He pushed his head up. "Oh, yeah, Dad, I understand. I... get it."

His father shook his head gravely. There was some thought in his eye, going unsaid right now, and it probably went something like _no, you'd never get it_.

And he'd probably be right.

:: ::

Hiccup started back, went to look for Astrid, not really sure what for. He needed to think, consider his next move, perhaps. Induction, he was sick of the word. But his father... well, there was no question he'd have to do his best. Try better at Gobber's training? It hardly seemed possible.

"Son," his father said behind him. Hiccup paused.

"I'm not going to let you fly Toothless home."

Hiccup snapped back to look up at his father. He wasn't taking it out on Toothless, was he?

"You need to stay here. We need to talk. You need to talk."

"But that means Toothless will have to be in the shipâ€¦"

"Correct."

"But-" Toothless would never stand for that. "He hates to be cooped up." Of all things, he didn't want a repeat of last month, being tossed about by a dragon trying desperately to get him on his back to go flying. Toothless still remembered two years ago, captured on that burning ship. Old memories die hard.

His father brushed him off with a hand. "It isn't that bad."

"No, no, no." Hiccup gestured his fist emphatically. "He really hates it."

"Then just calm him down."

"Dad, I just don't think we should do that to him again." The storm picked up, flapped his hair over his face.

His father was getting emphatic now. "You need to tell the tribe about that great boom, and you need consequences for your actions."

Hiccup took a deep breath. "Dad, I understand, but I can't let Toothless-"

"Is it always about that dragon?!" His father gazed daggers into him, and Hiccup got weak in the knees suddenly. "You get that dragon in here," his father said, calmly, firmly.

"Yes, Dad," Hiccup whispered, moved to the end of the ship, to the gangplank. Astrid stepped quickly with him. "Gobber said we had to stand back. Was it that bad?"

Hiccup sighed, slipped down the plank, followed quickly by her. They slipped onto the muddy sand together. "Well?" she prodded.

"Ahh," he sniffed, slumped his shoulders. "I guess it was." He walked forward, looked for Toothless. The dragon bounded up to him suddenly from behind a rock formation, licked him affectionately.

"Hey, Toothless."

Toothless eyed him big and questioningly, looked up to his father on the ship and then down to Hiccup.

"Yeah, that?" He looked up at his father, still gazing at him.

"Toothless..." He looked at his dragon. "I'm sorry, but he wants me on the ship. I... well, I made it bad for the both of us. Will you forgive me?"

Toothless' eyes got big again and he hummed sympathetically, nuzzled Hiccup's face, throated a smile. Hiccup put his arms around the dragon's head. Thanks, buddy.

Astrid put a hand on Hiccup's shoulder. "I'll walk back with you," she said, and they trudged back together. Hiccup noticed that she didn't ask about his illicit adventure, and he was grateful. He looked up at her and they shared a smile.

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Hiccup watched Astrid fly off on Stormfly, looked back at Toothless by the bow. Toothless hung his head and front feet over the edge of the ship, sinking the left side lower into the water, pitching the hull. Toothless gazed at the storm and the speeding blue wings growing farther and farther away. The cold, fast winds curled through the black dragon's wings, shaking their membranes.

Hiccup sighed, turned his head and looked at his father manning the tiller. Dad had that look in his eye, the thinking look. He eyed Hiccup, put his big hand out and gestured Hiccup forward.

Hiccup walked up to him.

"Well, son, it's your turn. How did it happen."

Hiccup took a breath. He wouldn't dodge this time. Or mumble. Or make excuses. He looked back at Toothless a moment. He was still okay. "I was curious about the lights under the ship. I went there to find out, and I encountered a Skrill." He inhaled again. "The Skrill was frightened by a large water dragon, who caused the boom you heard." He detailed the encounter over the sea, then eyed Toothless again, saw the dragon looking from side to side, expectant, moaning lightly. That was the beginning. He pursed his lips, continued. "By then, I was far enough to see the ships."

He felt his father take a greater interest. Toothless was eyeing the crew now, his tail flapping, dragging on the boards, his wings flat against his back.

Hiccup continued to watch him. "There were a lot of ships, miles maybe. I watched for a while, then I came back." Toothless was opening his wings now, leaning over the edge again, pulling his head forward, groaning.

Hiccup wanted to go comfort him, but his father spoke. "Explain the ships, son. I was intending to send a party over, but apparently you preempted me."

Hiccup bobbed his head back and forth, looked down.

"The ships' appearance?"

"Old." He eyed Toothless, who was looking at him now, worried.

"Any sign of location, identification?"

Toothless was cowering at the mast now, the huge sail flapping. "Uh... they were quite well-kept before. Maybe-" Toothless shook his head at the pole. "-a lot of travel?"

"And the people, did you see the crew, the chief?"

Hiccup put his hand out in Toothless' direction. It's okay, buddy. He looked back at his father. "The people? I, uh, well, there was a girl." The man who looked like Dad... "And a man who looked exactly like you. Those two had authority." Toothless flapped his wings, screeched and ran up to the bow, turned back to the mast, back to the bow. The ship lurched to the movement, and the crew started yelling at Toothless. Hiccup stepped away and started to yell something back, but a hand was suddenly on his shoulder, and he heard his father say something. Hiccup turned back. "What?"

"I said, did he have a curved sword?" His father's eyes were very pointed now, as if all the world, the storm and the wind, did not exist at all.

"Who?" Hiccup asked, his mind flitting from that odd look to Toothless, whose jolts he still felt vibrating the ship.

"The man on the ship, Hiccup."

"Oh, uh..." Toothless was bounding, cowering, crawling towards the stern, looking at Hiccup. "Uh..." He thought back, saw the ships and that scene. "Yeah, I guess he did." Toothless put his wings out again and threw himself into Hiccup, soft enough to keep the boy from falling. He moaned wildly. Hiccup stroked him. "Toothless-"

His father was strangely quiet and Hiccup turned and looked up. Stoick's eyes were wide open, looking out into the sea. Toothless screamed plaintively, old fear and memories in his wide eyes. "Toothless, you're gonna be okay." The dragon shook his head briskly, mouthed Hiccup's harness from the front, dragged him slightly.

"Son..." His father's voice was soft.

Hiccup put his hands on Toothless' face. "Toothless, you've got to calm down."

"Hiccup, you realize that may be Rune."

Hiccup paused, turned to his father. So that was the name of Stoick's brother. He blinked at the shard of wind that hit him suddenly. The name so rarely came up in his life, and to hear his father speak it with such emotion...

Stoick looked out at the sea, to the horizon, where the ships were, where the storm was now low and blustering. "So he's come back after all these years..."

Toothless wailed, flapped his wings desperately, catching Hiccup's attention again. His father was muttering something about banishment, undoing that, restoring Rune's rights again in the tribe, starting again from the beginning.

Toothless was pushing his head harshly into Hiccup. "Dad!" he shrieked, "Toothless can't stand it. Please, won't you let me take him home?"

His father turned to him, a glassy look in his eye. He blinked, as if he suddenly realized where he was. He looked at Toothless. The dragon shut his eyes tight, moaned, opened them and bobbed his head to the sky, wailing.

"Dad, _please_."

His father blinked slowly, waved his palm at him, nodded his head slightly.

"_Thank you_, Dad," Hiccup breathed and mounted Toothless quickly. In a moment he was in the storm, wind and rain and lightning in his face.

7. Chapter 6: The Fireside

a/n: My sister and I (the writing team behind this work) really stuffed a lot of information into this chapter! I hope you all enjoy it.

View the illustration at the official webpage. Put a period where the dashes are: [howtotrainyourdragon2 - thecomicseries - com](http://howtotrainyourdragon2-thecomicseries-com)
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><p>How to Train Your Dragon II
>The Dragon Whisperer

**Chapter 6
>

**The Fireside
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By the time he reached Berk, the storm was mostly grumbling. Hiccup stroked Toothless, relieved he had calmed by now. He'd have to make it up to Dad. He sighed, looked up at the sky. The pelting rain was somewhere closer to the storm's heart, somewhere... Hiccup looked up. Somewhere a lot farther in. He shivered, the wetness now soaking into his skin and the misty wind threatening to give him pneumonia. It would _not_ be a pretty sight to be sniffing at Induction. He wiped his nose. "Toothless, you better hurry home." He looked down at his left leg, the sight of the prosthetic metal glistening making him cringe. He needed to dry that thing before it rusted.

They passed the glowing light towers and the moored ships on the coast. Toothless swung up, pounded on the wet grass near Hiccup's house. "Whoa!" Hiccup caught his balance. Toothless turned his head, peered up at him. Hiccup looked into the big green eyes, saw that the sad memory was gone now. He smiled. "I'm all right, buddy." He unhooked himself from the saddle, and jumped off Toothless. The dragon gave him a toothless grin. Hiccup laughed. He stepped around and unhooked Toothless' rigging. The sniffles got him again and Toothless noticed. He nudged Hiccup and bobbed his head towards the house, looking at him. Hiccup continued, shook his head. "Thanks, but I'm almost done."

Hiccup unlatched the last of Toothless' equipment and pushed them into the little overhang they'd created adjacent the house. Toothless nudged him towards the door. "All right, Toothless," Hiccup said through a laughing smile, sliding on the grass with Toothless' determined force. "I'm going in now." Toothless nodded and closed his eyes.

Hiccup stepped up to the door, up the wooden steps, paused. That Great Dragon. And Toothless. He turned slowly, peeked behind him. Toothless had his eyes shut, his mouth open to the sky, catching the flood of droplets, opening his wings and wiggling his head in the falling water. Hiccup watched him a minute, put all the questions out of his mind for a moment, thought that maybe there was nothing more beautiful than just being free and happy. And to have a friend like Toothless. He smiled, pushed open the door and suddenly realized how cold and wet he was. Reflective pools traced his steps behind him, dripping down into the floorboards. He sniffled, hated sopping up the floor like that. But what could he do? They were Vikings. They get wet.

He puddled up the stairs, paused, thought he'd better start a fire before Dad gets home, squished back down and pushed a few of the embers together. Threw a heap of twigs and a couple big timbers into the pit in the center of the room, lighted it, blew, then jumped up the stairs to his room.

He whistled back down, happy in his new dry tunic and pants, holding his fur boot in one hand and his riding harness in the other. The fire in the center of the room sparkled with embers and the crackle, smoke, and warmth of timbers burning. He rushed over to it, pleased. He slid onto the back corner of the low stone rim, looking towards the door, and lay his stuff on either side of him, near the flames. Rune, his father said? He sniffed and wiped his nose on his sleeve, tried to remember what Dad said last about the uncle he never knew. He shifted his weight, and his eyes drifted to the wet metal of his prosthetic. He sighed.

Sometimes he just got lazy. He pushed out the metal of his left leg into the fire, let the flames lick at the chipped iron, keeping his leg back enough to keep the upper area of wood from touching the flames.

The warmth finally got too hot for his skin and he jerked back after a minute. He bent his left leg under him, examined the metal. It looked pretty dry now. He pulled up his knees, lay his chin between them, watched the golden play of fire. The red licking out from the bottom, turning into yellow, some sort of orange. The charcoal ebbing with color. Reminded him of the forge. He spent so long out there, making that lightweight metal ship he invented. Toothless, helping him. He smiled. _Metal ships were so ridiculous to build, but I think I'm making progress with the design. And Dad would be on my back to get a large version made to replace his front line. A metal Drakkar..._

He nuzzled into his knees, watched the fire. Flickering, ebbing, flowing up and beautiful. A beautiful fire.

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Toothless had his mouth open for about a minute or so before he

realized the storm was over and all the rain was gone. He bobbed his head down, peered up at the sky. Storms were so much fun, but they don't last forever. He sniffed and jerked his head involuntarily, started walking up to his boy's house. He paused suddenly, looked back, at the black ocean that was calming now, the gray clouds that were beginning to give way into blue night sky and stars.

Why didn't I control myself on the ship?

He hated seeing Hiccup worried and he shouldn't have done that to him. It was all in the past, he told himself - _and the past doesn't repeat itself._ The people were good to him, they'd never hurt him again. Toothless shook his head.

Something vibrated in his ear flaps suddenly and Toothless halted, thinking quickly, _Ormarr_.

He told me he'd want to meet me here. Has he come so soon? Toothless turned back from the house, started bounding past the steps of the Great Hall, slipping down onto the hanging bridge of the side of the island, past Raven Point. He ran through the landscape, scampered through the pines and vines, then made his way to where the shore lay a long ways down. He panted at the edge of the forest, skidded down to the sand and glinting gravel by the black water. Where was that great dragon?

Then he saw the lights. Glimmering under the waves, like an underwater aurora.

Toothless let out a loud growl. _Ormarr!_

The glimmering shape in the sea turned towards the shore, growled back in a loving, lilting way. Soon the lights were bright before him, the bright shining tendrils like seaweed on his long body and streaming down the huge, whalish head he'd never seen for almost sixty summers. Years, Hiccup called them, Toothless amended himself quickly, barely conscious of his own thoughts, still captivated, gazing up as Ormarr's great hulking form shadowed the moon and cast a great black shadow on the shore, the water falling off his textured neck and body and his eyes alive with color and light. His wings, vast as they were but too small to fly, opened up slightly and let the moonlight filter through their filaments. The atmosphere warmed suddenly, and Toothless watched the air dilute around the great island of his form as the vast mist of his body heat rose around him.

Ormarr settled gently onto the shallow shoreline, sent the waves chasing away from him in wild reverberations, washing up with whitewater onto the shore and into the back of the sandbank, into the edge of the forest, licking the base of the trees. Toothless jumped as the water raced under him like the evening tide in double time.

I told you I'd be coming, Ormarr hummed, his eyes going yellow.

Toothless bounded down into the water, let the cool iciness play up his scales. _How did you find me, after all this time? I thought you'd be in sleep for much longer._

Than sixty summers, you mean? Ormarr eyed him playfully. _I'm not that much of a snooze, there's too much life to live._

Toothless gurgled what Hiccup would call a laugh._ Should I get you up to speed on the world events?_

Ormarr blinked amusedly, nuzzled the sand. _I guess I was just lucky to find you. Following the ships was all I was doing. Catching up with the rest of the water dragons._ His great lumbering groans shook the waters around him gently.

Toothless hummed back acknowledgedly, realized he was getting a bit cold in the water now. He wasn't like the water dragons, too much cold could really set him in a bad way. Ormarr noticed the hesitation, nudged Toothless closer to him with his massive wet snout. _Come here, Dagr, before you catch your death of cold._

Toothless edged deeper into the water, brushed alongside the steaming, barnacled Toothless edged deeper into the water, brushed alongside the steaming, barnacled body, the warmth of the fire in the great dragon's side calming his cooled skin. Toothless reacted quickly to the mention of his old dragon name. He hummed strongly. _I'm not Dagr anymore, Ormarr._

Ormarr blinked, eyes turning greener now, the lights on his body glinting in a wave pattern down his neck. _So he renamed you, then?_ He pondered briefly, throated something deep and long. _I have heard some things about you and thisâ€¦ human._

Toothless sat on the sand, splashed his tail around him, let the tailfin and the prosthetic double reflect the moonlight. _See this?_

The great dragon hummed, looked at the tail, which glinted green now with the new light.

Toothless brayed sharply. _I wouldn't be able to fly without him. He built that for me. Humans are not what we thought they were._

Ormarr lolled a groan again. _I gathered that much from when you introduced me out there on the sea. Doesn't he look sort ofâ€¦ weak, for a Viking? After what you've gone through, you deserve better, Dagr._

It's not Dagr, It's Toothless.

Ormarr grunted, slapped the water with his great tail, almost knocking Toothless off his footing and sending waves like small tsunamis onto the shore, slamming into the tree trunks of the forest up ahead. Ormarr's eyes flared yellow, like small suns up there above the water. _It's just that I care for your welfare, Toothless._ He hummed the new name pointedly, gruffly. _You were like a son to me, all those summers ago. Do you really love this human?_

His name's Hiccup.

Fine! Hiccup. What is he to you exactly? Ormarr's eyes glowed intensely, and Toothless stared into them, carefully. The wind was gentle now, wafting past his scales slowly, and the moonlight, so

still and quiet, the storm all gone now, the skies clear at last, the stars bright and shining. Toothless hummed pointedly.

He's my friend.

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Hiccup threw another log into the fire, thought that it was perhaps, hmm, aboutâ€¦ fifteen, twenty minutes since he got home? Dad was a long ways off still, Toothless was out having fun in the rain, Astrid was probably sleeping or just getting home. The kidsâ€¦ the poor guys. _I wonder how Meatlug fared with the Great Dragon's boom._ Astrid _did_ say they all flew off from the sound of it. Fishlegs was probably worried. Hookfang would have put up a fight.

Suddenly someone tapped his shoulder. He whirled. He could have sworn no one was-

It was Astrid looking down at him.

"Astrid! When'd you get in?"

There was a worried, almost critical look in her eyes.

"Hiccup, you _have_ to start paying attention. Getting surprised by the enemy _isn't_ going to look good at Induction."

Hiccup groaned. "Would you quit with the Induction Day?" Everyone was forcing on him some sure-fire trick to cheat the Council. What was this, some game? And Astrid, too... It was enough to have Gobber as teacher. But at least he didn't force a practice sword fight on you every afternoon. Where did she get the idea that she could push him around like that? Yeah, maybe like she said, just trying to help you, you can't mess up on this one. But-

He inhaled. It was almost enough to make him take back that necklace of Toothless' scales he made her for her birthday last month. He buried his head in between his knees. "I'm just trying to think here, Astrid. I just..." He stared at the fire.

She mumbled something indistinct, and he felt her flap her hands against her hips. "Hiccup, I'm trying to _help_ you."

Hiccup shook his head. She plopped herself down onto the low wide rim of the fire pit, crossed her legs under her.

There was an uneasy silence. The flicker of the flames suddenly seemed to be very loud. Hiccup didn't like this feeling. He lifted his head, looked at her, the eyes that were staring down at the fire, the flicker reflecting in the pools of blue.

"I'm sorry, Astrid," he said.

Her eyes shifted to him and she smirked, waving off his apology. She shoved his boot to the floor and slid closer to him. "I just don't want you to be nervous. It's just a ceremony."

He took a deep breath, let it out slowly. That's just the thing. Dad didn't consider it just a ceremony. He'd make sure life was much more difficult after this so-called ceremony. One-time thingâ€¦

right!

"You _can't_ be nervous."

Dad was making it into some sort of maturity thing. So, what if he failed? This can't be the last chance to prove he wasn't a kid anymore.

"It's not really anything new, Hiccup," Astrid was saying. "It's happened to every Chief's son."

He smirked. Well, _that_ doesn't exactly help. Something more important entered his head, and his mouth dried suddenly. Maybe Dad just didn't want to be let down, not in something that mattered in his world? He was chief, after all. Wouldn't he want his son to do good in something that had been fundamental for generations?

Astrid had stopped talking. "Hiccup?" She prodded him with a gentle hand. "Talk to me."

He turned his head slightly, looked at her and the fire reflecting playfully off her eyes. All these months she'd been trying to prepare him for the great mock battle on Induction Day— but leading Dad's commanders? It wasn't as easy as just saying, Okay, Dad I won't let you down. A shiver rolled up his back. "It's in three days, Astrid. Do I _really_ know what to expect?"

Her eyes sparkled again, and she got that spirit in her voice. "Oh come on!" Her lips curved into a sneaky smile. "Hasn't Gobber been on your tail for months? Aren't you getting fitted for your Dad's Induction Day armor tomorrow morning?"

That was one way to get his mind off his problems. What mad Viking came up with the idea of hand-me-down Induction ceremony getups, anyway?

"And what about his lessons?" she prodded.

"Well, those weren't exactly _lessons_."

"Mock battles seem very useful to me, even if they _are_ small."

"Yeah, like the water fight around Berk?" He couldn't help but laugh. "A great backstroke is really going to knock the socks off the Council."

Astrid leaned forward, pulled her knees up. "Okay, I admit, his lessons aren't the best. But what about that weapons training? All that sword practice. I mean, he's got you to strategize a little bit, hasn't he? And what do you think your dad's going to throw at you anyway? Actual war?"

Hiccup buried his head in the arms over his knees, peeked at the fire. Reasons didn't make him feel any better. And he still sucked at sword fighting.

She poked him. "Come on, let's talk about something else. You're going to be fine, that's a given. So it's old news."

He smiled, knew she was just saying things, but appreciated it anyway. He went back and stared at the fire.

She nudged his face suddenly, getting her hands between his cheek and his arms. He blinked. Hey-

"Get out of that cocoon and look at me," she said playfully, started to tickle his neck and arms.

He started laughing. "Astrid, stop!" He jolted, tried to get away. "Stop!"

She giggled fiendishly, started tackling him on the ledge, pushing his legs down on the edge of the fire pit. "Astrid, what are you-?"

"Just straighten out, Hiccup," she squeaked and he let his legs unbend and stretch out. She smiled, flopped her head down and rested on his lap, smiling up with a smug contentedness. She set her big, beautiful, brilliant blue eyes on him and a nervous chill ran up his spine. "You know," she said, a light lilt in her voice, "we don't hardly get to be alone. There's always some townsfolk butting in asking about how to fix his dragon or something."

He blinked and looked away from those gorgeous eyes. "Well, that's not exactly trueâ€¦"

"Of course you wouldn't notice. You're always busy making something or training at the Academy or flying who knows where."

"I am not."

"Are too."

He sighed, shook his head. She snuggled into his lap, slipped her hand under her head. He blinked, got strangely jumpy again, wondered why he'd still feel this way when it had been two years. _I guess because mostly they'd been just hanging out, with the rest of the kids?_ _Or maybe she was just that beautiful. Of all the sappy reasonsâ€¦_

She turned her head towards the flames and closed her eyes, humming pleasantly. He watched the glint of orange play across her braided hair, the yellow curls soft and beautiful. He brought his left hand over the top of her head, patted the very top of her hair, soft enough so she wouldn't notice.

She rested there on his lap awhile. He looked up at the fire, felt warm, contentâ€¦ very, very content. Then she opened her eyes, looked up at him. Just looked. His nerves unfurled again. A smile played on her lips and she suddenly took her hand and swept the bangs away from her forehead. "Hiccup?"

"Yeah?" he asked, cautiously.

"What do you think your children will look like?" Her voice was soft.

He started back slightly, not really having thought of such a question. "I don't know, reallyâ€¦" He never thought thatâ€¦ well,

forward. "What do you think yours will?" he asked back, looking at her.

She was staring at him with an odd sort of prodding eyes, warm and suddenly full of meaning and words.

"Astrid?" he asked, puzzled and a little worried.

"Oh," she breathed, blinked and smiled. "I know what _my_ children will look like."

"Yeah, what?"

"They'll have red hair."

His brows raised.

"And beautiful green eyes." She paused lightly.

Hiccup stared down, blinked, suddenly put two-and-two together. "Ohâ€¦ ah." Yeah, she was talking about _him._ He laughed something small and uneasy, ran a hand through his hair, feeling suddenly _extremely_ self-conscious. It was one thing to gawk at her, quite another the other way around. And she kept looking at himâ€¦

Suffering scallops.

She rolled around to her right side, away from the fire, snuggled her head up against him, tilting her eyes and smiling mischievously. "You're not going to get away from me, Hiccup. I'm not marrying _anyone_ else."

Oh, man, she was talking about marriage now? A whole wave of emotions hit him suddenly. From one end it was, _Astrid, you just said you want me forever_ and from the other it was, _Holy smokes, you're thinking about marriage already?! _Marriage was huge, stuff that only happens when you've got one battle under your belt or at least have grown a beard. Not that he really desired either, but that was _besides the point!_ right now. "Uhâ€¦ Astrid, I don't think I'm ready."

"For what?"

"What you were talking about, of course."

"What was I talking about?"

All right, so it was getting pretty clear she wasn't actually wanting to marry him, like, _right now_. "You know what?" he sputtered quickly. "Forget it. I was just gabbing, nothing. Soooorry." He gulped suddenly, cleared his throat and looked away quickly, thought madly that he probably looked about as red as the fire right now. It's not like he didn't want to do that, you know, _eventually_. But thinking about it nowâ€¦ He had to admit, it frightened him. Husband was a big word, and what had he done to warrant it? He could barely handle his own sword, what kind of Man of the House was that? He sighed. Dad was right; he was still a kid. He stared up at the door, hoping she wasn't reading his mind.

The door moved suddenly and he jumped, surprised. "_Dad!" _he shrieked and Astrid slipped from his lap in his motion to stand. "Ah!" she yelped. He tried to catch her, the swoop of his arm tripping the harness on his left to the floor. But momentum had its way and she lost her balance, sending the two of them tumbling over the ledge opposite the fire. "Ugh," he sighed. He felt his father standing over them.

"Son," his father said, his voice void of severity. Hiccup looked up, thought he even saw a hint of a smile under the big man's beard. "Hi, Dad," he mumbled, trying to get to his feet, feeling around for Astrid to help her up and realizing she was already on her feet and handing him his boot. "Thanks," he said and fumbled the boot on.

His father was shaking his head now, wandering off towards the back of the house, past the fire pit. "Get to sleep, Hiccup, it's going to be a big day tomorrow."

"Oh?" Hiccup turned to his father.

Stoick looked at him, gravely almost, as if Hiccup should have known. His father paused, looked down at Hiccup pointedly. "Rune is coming back, afterâ€¦ after-" He gestured suddenly. "Well, since before you were born." He inhaled, heaving his frame largely, paused, before starting off towards the big bed near the dinner table and the back of the house. Hiccup stared after him, feeling like there was something he hadn't said yet. "Dad?" he prompted quietly.

His father stopped. Hiccup took a step forward, tried to bridge the gap.

Stoick slowly removed his helmet, moved it gently around in his hands. "I should have contacted him sooner," he said. The firelight played gently off his hustled eyebrows, casting shadows that made it hard to see what was going on in his mind. He looked at Hiccup, started to say something. Stopped, realized something and hung up his helmet with a bang. He moved off into the shadows. Hiccup didn't follow him. There was something serious going on, serious enough to make Dad forget about punishing him for the whole mess he made that day. Astrid peered at Hiccup, her arms gesturing curiously at him, her mute lips mouthing questions. He put a hand up and took her hand, guiding her to the door.

"Who's Rune?" she asked hoarsely, trying to be quiet.

"Outside." He opened the door, escaping into the moonlight. The clouds had all gone now and the clear black open sky dotted with lights threatened to distract him beyond recovery. So beautiful. He glanced up once and turned to Astrid.

"He's my father's younger brother. His real brother." He stepped down the walk. "Spitelout came after my grandmother died."

"How come I never heard of him?" she asked, still whispering, standing on the step behind him.

"Even _I_ never heard Dad talk about him." He stopped, looked up at her. "I only know he was banished before I was even born."

"Banished" she mused. "Don't only really bad criminals get that?" She let the words hang in the air delicately.

Hiccup swallowed, suddenly felt the embarrassment in that.

"What could he have done?"

He shrugged, trying more to get off that feeling of an _outcast_ in his family. "No one told me," he mumbled.

She was quiet for a minute, and Hiccup didn't look at her, watched the glint of the moon playing white and aqua over the edge of the ocean, listed the reasons people were cast out of a tribe. Theft, treason, murder Which was it, then? And why did Dad want to accept him back?

Astrid spoke up again, her voice closer to him this time. "So that's what the ships were all about, then? I guess you _did_ see something interesting when you went over." There was a hint of playful chiding in her voice.

Hiccup smiled, nodded, glad she didn't seem too affected by his awkwardness by the fireside. "Besides the great dragon I saw," he started, "the Skrill I got stuck with for a minute there, yeah, I saw the ships. Dad thinks it's his brother on the ship, because I told him a guy there looked like him."

Her eyes popped open and she stepped closer to him. "Hold it." She whipped her hand around in a quick circle. "Back up a little, what exactly happened out there?"

"Sorry, Astrid, I forgot I didn't tell you yet." He filled her in quickly and she whistled. "Toothless has some secrets, hasn't he?"

"No, he doesn't," Hiccup sniffed, looked around suddenly and wondered, where _was_ Toothless anyway?

She kicked a pebble on the stone walkway, crossed her arms. "You better get to sleep, Hiccup, we don't want your Dad on your back _again_."

Hiccup took one more look around, figured he'd better trust Toothless. The dragon probably found some squirrel he wanted to chase down into the woods. He did that every once in a while. He'd come back. It's not like they locked their door or anything, so he could crawl back up when he was ready. He turned and looked at Astrid, suddenly noticed how the blue moonlight cast an unreal glow over her face.

For a strange long moment she just stood there, the dark blue shadows shaping her round face and the moonlight lifting off the highlights of her headband and the streaks of hair that hung down from the sides of her head.

I'm not marrying anyone else.

She actually said that. _She_. Not just him thinking it. He blinked and suddenly smiled, watching her in the moonlight, not really sure how long it was, if it wasn't actually a single second that he was

living in slow motion, as he looked into her sparkling eyes and remembered that time he first saw her when he was only five years old, and then those years she ignored him and hated him and _then_ two years ago when somehow the most hated thing he'd ever done brought her heart to him at last. He took in a deep breath of cool night air, let his heart swell with the pride, joy, the sheer honor of, ofâ€| her.

"I guess I'll see you tomorrow?" she said suddenly.

"Oh," he snapped back, grinned and felt awkward again. "Yeah, tomorrow."

A gentle wind blew through suddenly, waving her hair deftly. She smiled quietly at him and squeezed his hand briefly. "Sweet dreams, then."

He got that warm feeling inside him, brought her hand up and kissed the tips of her fingers, the soft gentle fingertips that were cool now and lovely. He let her hand down, and she looked at him sweetly, took her hand and curved it around his head, through his hair, stepped close and kissed him gently. "Good night, Hiccup," she said and slipped away into the night. He stood by and watched her go, the flutter in his heart cool and contented now. He walked back slowly, watched the big, beautiful, brilliant full moon cast its lovely blue light on the sea.

8. Chap 7: If He Touches You, I'll Kill Him

a/n: A huge chapter! Sorry about that, folks, but we wanted the story to move forward more than if we posted only a couple scenes. I do think things are gonna escalate from here. At least, that's the plan.
^^

View the illustration at the official webpage. Put a period where the dashes are: [howtotrainyourdragon2 - thecomicseries - com](http://howtotrainyourdragon2-thecomicseries-com)
>or at my deviantArt gallery: [inhonoredglory - deviantart - gallery - 38855965](http://inhonoredglory-deviantart-gallery-38855965)<p>

* * *

><p>How to Train Your Dragon II
>The Dragon Whisperer

**Chapter 7
>

**If He Touches You, I'll Kill Him
>

"But it was a long time ago, wasn't it? I don't knowâ€| does anybody know? Hiccup wouldn't be killed, would he?" A guilty laugh, then a heavy pause. "I guess _you_ made sure of that. And now, well, now I'm grateful. Butâ€| would Rune forgive him?"

The Chief's voice was soft, quiet, and she could barely hear him in the early morning air. She exhaled, let the bushes hide her again, turned, and ran down towards the town, hoping he hadn't heard or seen her, left the big man alone on the cliffside, facing the sea.

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A jolt woke him up suddenly. "Aah!" Hiccup's eyes popped open and he rolled over in his bed, feeling something terribly close to him.

"Ha!" shouted Snotlout, standing over him hugely. "It's time to get up, Future Chief Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third!"

"What-?" he stammered, squinting at the sudden influx of light from the window that- he looked over. The shades were being tied up by Ruffnut and Tuffnut. Ruffnut's crazy braid started flipping about near his drying ink sketches of Toothless. "Careful!" he shrieked, suddenly saw Toothless stepping onto the side of his bed, trying to nuzzle him. He leaned forward, looked past him, saw Ruffnut whipping her head back to see him. "Just mind the drawing, won't you?" he said, smiling something lopsided at her, turned back to Snotlout. "Okay, what's the deal? Who let you guys in?" Toothless finally got his snout into Hiccup's cheek and Hiccup laughed irritably.

"Gobber," Snotlout answered, grinning and crossing his big arms.

Hiccup put a hand on Toothless head, tried to get the dragon out of his face. "Dad let him?"

"Your Dad hasn't been here most of the night."

Hiccup paused, and Toothless licked him suddenly. "Buddy-!" Hiccup wiped the side of his face.

"At least, Gobber said he wasn't in for all that time," chimed in Fishlegs, laughing as Toothless once again slobbered their future chief. Hiccup finally got his hand on Toothless' snout, pushed and eyed the dragon critically. Toothless blinked and smirked. "Ugh, Toothless," Hiccup laughed, "A guy could bathe in your affection." He pushed the blanket off him, felt Toothless crawling over the bed and hovering over his head. Hiccup swung his legs over the edge of the bed. Hey- "Dad was out all night?"

"And mom blames _us_ for nightowling," Tuffnut slurred, nodding at Ruffnut.

"But why?"

"Gobber doesn't tell us _that_ much," Tuffnut spat, getting that insulted look on his long face.

Hiccup smirked, let Toothless nudge his head again. "You know where he went?"

"Like I saidâ€¦" Tuffnut glared at him.

Hiccup shook his head, stood up next to Snotlout. He needed to get some real information somewhere else. Toothless slipped off the bed and wandered by the doorway. Hiccup gently pressed up and down on the springs of his left leg, to get it going for the day, slowly slipped on his fur vest. Snotlout watched him bob his leg, then reached over

and grabbed Hiccup's tunic, jolting him forward. "Come on!" Snotlout screeched suddenly, "let's get moving, gang! There's another battle and we're all gonna be a part of it!" He slapped an arm around Hiccup and dragged him forward to the door. "And we also all can't wait to see you in Stoick's old outfit." Toothless got wind of the excitement and started jumping up and down by the doorway, throating at Hiccup and grinning. Toothless, Hiccup thought, you're no help. He tried to escape the huge grasp of his cousin, but now the rest of them were pulling him down the narrow flight of stairs, out the door, much more excited than he was.

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Gobber had the old Induction Day coat of armor all laid out on the cold forge of his blacksmith shop. The kids plopped Hiccup down in front of it and he lurched forward, caught the edge of the fire pit to steady himself.

"Well, here it is," Gobber said serenely.

Toothless was at his side suddenly, looked at the armor and throated a grin, looked up at Hiccup for approval. Hiccup pursed his lips, shrugged, turned down and looked at the armor. The hundreds of little shingles of metal running down its skirt, rusting at the edges, the heavy leather belt, worn and dirty in a heroic sort of way. The stone buckle, etched with something that was rubbed into nothingness a long time ago. The fur cape laying beside it, a miniature of the one his father wore, black with age and tattered in its bundles of hair, the oval stone epaulets on its corners, etched with- He looked closer, could see the faint remains of a dragon's head screaming out at the world, half of its shape obliterated by time and use and wear. Toothless got his head there, sniffed the old armor curiously, running his snout over the shingles and fur.

"Well, what do ya think?" Gobber said, in a nostalgic way that made Hiccup lean upward a bit. He looked at the armor, remembered that his father wore this a long time ago, that Gobber probably was there, when they were both much younger. Toothless retreated somewhat, started getting bored with the human activities, curled around himself in the corner of the blacksmith shop.

Snotlout and the rest of them crowded around him, gaping at the clothing. "Wow," Fishlegs said. Snotlout picked up the cape and swooped it around himself grandly. "It's a perfect fit!" he squealed, jabbing Tuffnut and muttering something. Probably an inside joke.

Gobber glared at them. "If ya want to play with yer chief's clothes, go put it on Hiccup."

Snotlout looked suddenly sheepish and swooshed the cape one more time around himself, held it out and sized up Hiccup. Something sneaky got into his eye and he nudged his head knowingly to Ruff and Tuff.

Uh oh, what are they up to now? Hiccup thought desperately. The twins suddenly grabbed his upper arms and started pulling off his fur vest. "Hey!" he shrieked, but they smiled mischievously and pulled up the shoulders of his tunic, Ruffnut slinging the fur vest on her arm. Astrid would never stand for this, he thought, gritting his teeth. Where was she anyway? Snotlout suddenly swept around him and clapped

onto Hiccup's tunic the latch of the stone epaulets embedded in the fur. Toothless was suddenly in the middle of the mess, hissing in an unsure way, glaring at Snotlout. "It's okay," Hiccup whispered quickly, "they're not hurting me." The kids whirled him so his back faced the smelter, then released him briskly.

"Wow!" Fishlegs gaped, staring at him. "You look amazing!"

Hiccup slumped down under the epaulets, which suddenly seemed to weigh a million pounds. Toothless eyed him sympathetically, put his head to one side, clearly unsure how to amend his boy's distress. Snotlout reached out and grabbed Hiccup quickly, holding him straight for a moment. "Hey, you're gonna have to get more umph in you to hold up your inheritance!" He laughed hysterically. Tuffnut jabbed Snotlout in the arm, snickering.

Hiccup flinched, tried to give a kind eye to Fishlegs, who was still all happy and delighted, holding his hands together, smiling. Looking very proud in general. Toothless walked up to Hiccup, slipped his head under the boy's arm, let Hiccup lean on him. "Thanks, bud," he hummed, steadying himself, trying to get used to something hard and heavy on his shoulders.

Gobber came around suddenly and did the helmet-over-eyes maneuver on all of the kids, except Fishlegs - who stepped out of the way just to be sure. Hiccup looked back at the rest of the mail on the fire pit. "Now." Gobber grabbed the armor, held it up in front of him, eyeing it and Hiccup. "It's definitely too big. We'll have to measure it. Here, Hiccup." He gestured Hiccup forward and patted Toothless gently out of the way. The dragon moaned briefly, backed away.

Gobber let Hiccup step into the armor, brought the leather belt up around Hiccup's thin waist and pulled it taut, folding the ends on each other. He took out some metal clasps that Hiccup suddenly noticed were between Gobber's teeth and jabbed them into the belt to keep it in place. Gobber straightened up suddenly, let go of holding the armor.

Hiccup tried his best not to collapse totally on the ground. He clenched his teeth and willed the rebellious metal to just _please!_ stay on him right now. Gobber continued to squint at him, making calculations that this time Hiccup didn't care to compute. "That's a whole lot to trim!" Gobber mused, clutch hand scratching his chin.

Hiccup exhaled sharply. Whoever started this stupid tradition certainly didn't plan on non-burly Vikings like himself. Couldn't he just go without it? "Maybe you'd better not change it up," he mumbled, "or it won't fit anybody else!"

"You mean at next Induction?" Ruffnut suddenly gaped. "_Your_ son?" She started smiling absurdly, giggling. "You're gonna get married and you're gonna have a son! Hiccup is gonna get married and have a kid! Hiccup, our little Hiccup, is gonna be a _dad!_" She prattled on, making faces at Tuffnut, who nodded wryly. Snotlout snickered, knew this was making Hiccup just a little uncomfortable. Hiccup slumped his shoulders, tried to ignore it, felt the epaulets shrink down farther. "Gobber, you're done now, right?"

Gobber was still peering at the mail, making thoughtful noises.

Hiccup looked somewhere else, the swords hanging on the walls, the hammer and the shards of metal left over from his shipbuilding project. Something long strung suddenly across his shoulders and he realized Gobber had gotten the measure out.

"Gobber?" he asked, as the measure now moved around his waist.

"Mm?" Gobber's mind was clearly somewhere else.

"Where did Dad go last night?"

Gobber looked up. "Ohâ€¦" He got a morose look on his face. "Hm." He slipped the measure from Hiccup's waist, looked behind him. "Hey, kids, shoo for a while, huh?"

The kids suddenly stopped gabbing among themselves, snapped back to look at Gobber. "Go," Gobber motioned.

Snotlout crossed his arms suddenly and the twins squinted their eyes. "You didn't tell us where his dad went, and we helped you wake Hiccup up."

"Just don't question me," Gobber said, rising.

"Stoick's our chief, too! Aren't we entitled to know?"

"But he's not yer dad," Gobber snapped. "And this is a personal story of Hiccup's father and it's Hiccup's right to hear it without a heap of insulting interruptions."

"Insulting!" Tuffnut squeaked. "He called us insulting!"

Gobber swooshed his hooked hand sharply. "Just shoo!" His head bobbed to one side and he saw a sword sitting on one of the tables, grabbed it suddenly and waved the weapon randomly. "Don't make me use this on ya." He slapped it down.

"Ah," Hiccup stepped forward. "What's the big deal? Do we have to get mad?"

Snotlout was not paying attention, rolled his eyes, and Tuffnut gave him a brothers-in-misery sort of look. "I think it's fair," Fishlegs piped, beginning to move off towards the opening of the smithy. Snotlout stepped behind Fishlegs and grumbled. "The chief's son gets all the benefits. What if his granddad met my grandmother first, right?" Snotlout disappeared behind Fishleg's round shape, and Hiccup wondered if he should say something, couldn't tell if Snotlout was joking or if he was really serious. Ruffnut shrugged her shoulders and looked at her twin, her eyes getting sneaky. She whacked a playful punch on her brother's back and they tumbled forward towards the outside, now totally consumed in jabbering at each other and tangling themselves in wild arm movements. Hiccup stepped forward and tried to catch up with them, to say sorry or something. They had almost all stepped out.

Ruffnut pushed her brother, turned before she left. "I'll just get it out of you later, Hiccup," she said, winking at him, "when the nutcase here is napping." Gobber leapt forward, waving his hand, his bum leg suddenly agile in the face of defending his honor. She popped out quickly, running out and screeching victory noises at her escape.

She tumbled into her brother and she sent them both tripping out over the plaza.

Gobber shook his head. "Youth," he said, slapping a hand to his clutch arm. "They'll never understand."

Hiccup leaned on the smelter, the heaviness of the armor getting a bit much for him. He didn't like this arrangement at all, throwing them out like that. He slipped down and slid onto the ground. "Gobber, was that really necessary?"

Gobber sighed, hobbled over to the edge of the fire pit, set his weight down on it and sniffed. "Welllllllllâ€| maybe I got carried away there. Ya know how it isâ€|"

"No, actually, I don't."

Gobber rolled his eyes. "You want to hear the story, Hiccup, or don't ya?"

He hung his arms over his knees. "Sure, Gobber," he sighed. Toothless walked up to him now and rested his snout in Hiccup's side. Hiccup patted him thoughtfully.

Gobber cleared his throat. "Well, Hiccup, I'm just gonna keep this short, because yer father did want you to get yerself set up in that Induction mail this mornin'." Gobber looked at his fingernails, picked at one of them. "Soâ€| back at the beginning. You have your father's brother Rune, and you have your father's father who had these two sons before your grandmother died, after which he wed again, as we all know, to have-

"Gobber- I know all that. I wanna maybe talk to my Dad after this, so could we speed it up a-

"That's the whole point of my talkin' to ya, Hiccup." Gobber shifted his weight, thumping his leg against Hiccup's shoulder. "Yer Dad's set off already."

"What?" Hiccup jerked his head up, looked Gobber in the eye.

"He set sail a half hour ago, to meet the ships and get a party over here."

Hiccup leaned down, a little taken aback. "Okayâ€|" Does this mean he was going to meet his uncle for, like, the first time in his life? And Dad didn't even tell him about any of it before they'd meet?

What, some secret?

Couldn't be. It couldn't be that simple.

Toothless suddenly nudged him, prodding with his eyes. Hiccup creased his brows, wished fiercely that he knew what was going on. It's not like a Chief owed anybody an explanation, but he was his son. Didn't that mean anything?

"There's more to the story, Hiccup," Gobber prodded.

Hiccup snapped out of his thoughts. "Oh, sureâ€¦"

"So then!" Gobber was back in his groove, trying to hurry through the story. "You have these two brothers. And _then_ you have this Induction Day on Stoick's eighteenth birthday. Rune was seventeen at the time. Rune and Stoick were not so good together, at least later. A childish feud, which blew up in its face in your father's _father's_ challenge for Induction Day. So Rune tried to kill Stoick and Stoick-

"Hey, _wait!_" Hiccup slapped his arms down, hitting Toothless unintentionally, stared up at Gobber. "Kill? You mean, like, _murder_? My _dad?_"

Gobber blinked at him, pulled his head back. "I guess that was one of the things you didn't knowâ€¦"

Toothless wrinkled his nose, grunted.

"Dad wasâ€¦" almost _killed?_"

Gobber's voice got soft suddenly. "That's right, Hiccup," he said.

Hiccup tried to imagine it a moment. If he had a brotherâ€¦ or if Tuffnut went after his sister. He shook his head. No way. "Gobber, that's his _brother_. How could-

"Hiccup," he interrupted suddenly, as if expecting the response, "there's a lot of things a family can do to one another. You're gonna hafta learn."

"But I just can't believe-

"Believe it, Hiccup. It's a part of yer past, and yer father's."

Hiccup sighed, tried to let the truth sink down into him. He wavered suddenly feeling a little, quite unsteady. His father, his dear strong, driving Dadâ€¦ "Why?" he asked, a great hush in his voice.

"That's where your mother comes in."

My mother? Hiccup searched, didn't even have a memory of her, never knew what she looked like because he'd never seen her. Something about going on Quests in her youth, Dad once said? The bundle of soft blonde hair his father kept under the pillow of his bed, the plates of metal armor hidden in a cubby near the back of the house, metal that never seemed to rust or get dusty. Hiccup inhaled. He really didn't know very much about his mother.

"Valhallarama," Gobber sighed. "Everyone called her Val, but not Stoick. Noooo, she was 'heather blossom' and 'sweet pea' and 'beautiful darling Valla.' Ah, but she was all that to Rune, too. You see the problem?"

Hiccup sniffed, was in no mood to see a problem. He leaned over his knees, trying to figure out how all this had been true all his life and he didn't know a thing about it. Because Dad never told

me.

"Well!" Gobber sighed suddenly. "They both wanted her and they both couldn't have her, of course, so they came up with some competition of sorts and battled it out on Induction Day of all days and Rune lost, got mad, went too far, and got himself kicked out of Berk. And that-" Gobber stood up and sighed. "-that is the Story."

Hiccup didn't say anything for a minute, felt his mind blank, stared at Toothless resting there in front of him, the gentle heaving of his breath, the black scales glinting in the morning light. The bare facts started settling, and Hiccup peered up at Gobber, feeling somehow so much older. "And last night?"

"We had a talk in the mornin', yer father and Iâ€| about Rune and the ships, them comin' here. Then he decided to meet him. He didn't say where he went in the night, only that he had been thinkin'â€| a lot."

Hiccup cleared his throat, nodded slowly. Gobber bobbed his head once in confirmation, fell silent.

Hiccup looked over the hard, crusty fur of the mantle sloping down from his shoulders and the shiny, rusted metal over his legs, realized horribly that all that had happened when his father wore these very clothes so long ago. He stood up suddenly, unlatched the metal clasps from the belt, let the armor slip to the floor, heard its sharp clear clang upon the blacksmith floor, rattling, shimmering, metal plates on metal panels. He unhooked the mantle from his shoulders, lay the fur on the smelter's edge, saw the moth-gnawed holes in the mantle, the pale white tatters of spiderwebs in the crevices, old and dusty and dirty.

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The trek to Firebrand Peaks was a long one. The morning had grown into a fairly warm day, and the pine trees waved shakily in the occasional brisk wind that pumped through Berk. Gobber finally found the mouth of the cave midway up the mountain, and guided the teens up to the little plateau that led up to the opening, ferns and tangled bushes lining the well-worn path to the opening and the complex tunnels within the Peaks.

Hiccup was more nervous than normal on this last practice battle. When Gobber was giving the mission briefing, Hiccup only noticed the sweat on his palms and the spark of nerves in the back of his neck whenever Gobber said "in two days." He couldn't lose this one, not this last time. He looked at his sword, held in both hands because the thing was just too heavy, the carefully etched handle with a Night Fury carving swirling on the end of the hilt, the thin long blade covered now with a casing of wood, so nothing really serious happened in practice. Dad gave it to him last month. "Make me proud, son," he'd said, nonchalantly back then, not even looking at him, maybe trying to inspire an easy confidence. He fumbled with the sword, tried to remember all the rules Gobber taught him and the ones his father started showing himâ€|

Gosh, what kind of a son was he? Couldn't even get something right that every other Viking kid could probably pass with flying colors. He looked over at the other kids, eating up every word coming out of

Gobber's mouth, sheer excitement in their voices as Gobber yapped on at a mile a minute. He caught wind that Astrid wasn't here yet, but was on her way, something about getting tied up at her parents' house for something she'd done. "She'll be here very soon, so Team Hiccup can just go on ahead and begin, I think."

Hiccup looked up from his sword, at Gobber motioning him forward. So now he was cheating for him, too? "Gobberâ€¦ I can't do that." The kids paused around him.

Gobber did not look fazed, hobbled up to Hiccup and stopped at his side, whispered, "Hiccup, this is yer last battle. It's not like I'm given' you that much of an advantage."

Hiccup shook his head. Gobber leaned down, looked at him. "You're goin' in that cave, Hiccup, and yer startin' that mission."

"No."

Gobber flapped his hands up. "You want to make yer father proud, don't you?"

"Of course I do, but it's got to be from my own doing." He kept his gaze on Gobber, tried to make him understand. Gobber sighed and looked out towards the forest, down the path they came.

"Hey, guys!" shouted Ruffnut suddenly. "Here comes Astrid."

Hiccup turned, saw her huffing up the path. Gobber put his hand on Hiccup's shoulder, pushed him towards the cave opening. "You start, Hiccup, with yer team, I'll brief her." Hiccup stumbled forward, dust puffing over his boot as he heeled it into the dirt. He looked back and thought he saw something tired in her movements.

Tuffnut and Fishlegs got behind him suddenly, blocking his view. "Come on, Hiccup, let's go."

"Wait." He pushed through the both of them, looked at Astrid and the other two teens gather around her. He could hear Gobber telling her the mission. The Find-and-Defend-a-Viking-Helmet Challenge, where, as Gobber so proudly shouted earlier, the two belligerents would search for Gobber's helmet hidden in the cave and battle it out for that most glorious treasureâ€¦ or simply burgle it from the other side.

Astrid moved forward, Snotlout and Ruffnut following her.

"Astrid, are you okay?" Hiccup asked as she passed.

"Later, Hiccup, we need to get this over with." She didn't even look at him, but there was an irritation in her voice he couldn't quite place. "Astrid?" But she was already moving off towards the cave, a flickering torch in her hand.

Gobber tapped his shoulder again. "Now, Hiccup, you can start." He handed him a torch.

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Hiccup waved the light slowly around the stone tunnel, watched its yellow sparkle play off the black, jagged edges of the concave ceiling, at the speckle of black dots in the limestone. Every once in a while they came upon the glowing cave creatures, the trickle of lights that hung from the miniature cliffs and clefts that textured the walls. They hissed ever so gently, like something far away, and ebbed their glow as the torchlight passed. Hiccup turned back to watch the team Gobber assigned him, saw some of the deep cave creatures vanish into the blackness, their glow voluntarily fading.

Hiccup waved his sword, trying to make some sort of 'forward!' gesture, but the heaviness of the wood-plated sword sort of stunting the motion. He could feel footfalls somewhere near, squinted and saw up ahead the glow of torchlight glinting off the cave walls, reflecting into a large cavern ahead from a tunnel somewhere perpendicular to his own tunnel. The footfalls advanced, increased, and he could hear the pattern of Astrid's walk, started finally to see the glow of her torchlight advancing down the tunnel. Hiccup breathed in, nearly coughed suddenly in the dust that suddenly swirled with the incoming footfalls.

"Fishlegs," he whispered, "take the torch." He bent his arm backward and the torch left his hand. He brought both his hands to hold his own sword and crept forward through the cavern. "Tuffnut, get ready to leap out, okay?" he said through the side of his mouth, his back against the cave wall. He took a deep breath, remembered the promise he made to himself last night with Dad on the ship. He'd lost so many battles before.

He whirled into the cavern, suddenly saw Gobber's helmet glinting there on the ground. He held his sword out in front of him, found Astrid standing there, light from a torch behind her, silhouetting her into a stark black shape and the long sword in her right hand.

He stopped a moment.

The orange glow behind her left suddenly and he felt his team gather round into the cavern, scrambling forward. Her team started yelling, Ruffnut smacking into her brother and sending wild insults into the air.

"Tuffnut, fight with your sword!" Hiccup screamed, his voice echoing, but the twins were having quite a time lashing out with their lips. Snotlout was making a threat to Fishlegs, the latter quibbling with his stumpy sword held out in front of him.

Hiccup turned to Astrid, firmed the long sword in his hand. She beat him in these official lessons the last twelve times out of twelve. But probabilities don't multiply on each other, right?

He swung his weapon at her, trying to cull up something that might look like violence. Man, how he hated sword practice. Why did he still have to do this sort of thing? She deflected his blow swiftly, tipping his sword to the ground. "Fight it, Hiccup," she screeched, slicing her sword expertly in the air, the flips of her sword confusing him as much as the echo in her voice. "Get some power in your blow."

"I'm _trying_." He swiped, breathless, managed to slip her sword, before she snapped a defensive maneuver on him, pushed his sword up vertical. He locked eyes with her, just- tried, _forced_ it, out of that position, jabbed it up towards her. She snapped, lunged down, hand on the floor, spearing him from below. The wooden tip dug into his side. "Ah!" he shrieked, jumping backward. His own sword fell out of his hand, clacked on the rock below. Astrid shook her head and leaped up, picked up his sword and pushed it towards him. "You're not losing this battle, Hiccup."

He took the sword, looked up at her, expected a firm and fiery conviction, but saw instead two weary eyes red and strained - that tiredness he saw before they started. Not another insomnia attack. She only got those when she was really worried. She readied her sword again, posed her body.

"Astrid, are you okay?"

She stopped suddenly, whirled her blonde hair and faced him. "What?" she asked, breathless, clearly not intent on pausing for small talk.

"Did you sleep at all?" He stepped towards her, his left hand and sword swinging behind him. He knew this sort of move 'in the midst of battle' would rank down in Gobber's book, in his _father's_ book, but he couldn't just let this go. He put a hand on her arm.

She sighed, lowered her sword. "No, I haven't slept. I was watching your Dad."

"You _saw_ him?"

Astrid pushed his hand off her arm, suddenly remembered what she was doing. "I have to tell you _later_, Hiccup. This is not the time or place." She got that fire again. "This is your _final_ battle." She looked out suddenly to the left, gasped. She grabbed Hiccup's arm and jolted him towards her gaze. Hiccup looked, saw Snotlout with his wood-encased sword at Fishlegs' stubby neck. "I submit!" Fishlegs squeaked and Snotlout made a move for the helmet. The twins broke their fighting a moment to watch Snotlout make the winning motion.

Astrid screeched suddenly. "Get it, Hiccup- _quick_." The whole cave voiced the last word, filling his ears with the command. She gave him a shove and he stumbled forward, almost tripping into Snotlout, who whirled with the helmet in his hand.

Hiccup jabbed his weapon, tried to knock the prize out. Snotlout whipped his own sword out, the wood casings clashing with each other, sharp and echoing in the cavern. The swords heaved down. Snotlout's eyes were wide open, alert and tense. He lunged his sword forward, catching Hiccup in the arm. He yelped. Snotlout jabbed again and Hiccup tried to deflect it, failed, found himself on his back on the floor of the cave, against the hard rock. Another blow, and Hiccup smacked it back with his own sword, the wood clashing, creaking, cracking. The casing- Snotlout's sword was suddenly gleaming bright and clear, shimmering unprotected in the torch light. "Snotlout-" Hiccup gasped. But he was already in motion with another blow.

Hiccup screeched, rolled to his left, and the sword came down behind him with a sharp, metal smack, reverberating around him and speeding down the tunnels, fading, fading, somewhere far away. He let out his breath.

"Snotlout!" Astrid's voice was barely steady.

Hiccup turned around, saw his cousin, face white and shocked, staring at his own unsheathed sword.

"Are you okay?" Astrid knelt down and grabbed Hiccup's shoulders suddenly, her eyes darting over his body.

He found himself inhaling a couple times, gazing at the spot where the sword came down. "Yeah, Astrid, I- I'm fine. Snotlout?" He looked up, met his eye. "It was an accident, okay?"

Snotlout opened his mouth, looked at his exposed sword, and mumbled, "I- I didn't knowâ€¦"

"That's okay." Hiccup tried to get to his feet, took Astrid's arms to steady himself. Fishlegs came up besides him and helped him up, his eyes comforting. Ruffnut and Tuffnut were suddenly quiet and docile.

Snotlout rolled the helmet in his hands, looking suddenly, unnaturally, unnerved. He held it out suddenly, looked at Hiccup. "I guess it's only fair." He bobbed the helmet towards him.

Hiccup shook his head. "I think this just proves you win. I mean, you really got me." Hiccup tried a nonchalant didn't fly too well with Astrid. She stared hard and incredulously at him and he pursed his lips. "Let's get back to Gobber, all right?" He started off towards the one tunnel, hoped they'd follow him. The cave creatures buzzed gently at the presence of the firelight.

Astrid was at his side suddenly, a torch in her own hand. "That Snotloutâ€¦" she hissed, kicking one of the glowing slimy creatures that was lumbering on the edges of the cave walls. "If he touched you, I'd kill him." The torchlight wavered as she spoke and the cave vaguely repeated her wordsâ€¦ kill him, kill him.

He didn't like that look in her eye. "Astrid, it was an accident."

She continued fuming, looked at another one of the lighted centipedes attached to the rocks. The creature stopped hissing suddenly.

He cleared his throat. "You said something about telling me later something?" He gazed at her carefully, hoping those eyes would change. He squinted in the torchlight, trying to read them in the shadows of her hair. But they only grew more tense and she inhaled carefully. "I don't know what your past is with your Dad," she said, heavily, "but definitely something's up that I don't think even you know about." She glanced at him.

Hiccup opened his eyes wide. "Dad and me?"

She sighed. "I was late for this lesson because I was up all night and then Mom kept me home for a few choice words. And I was up all

night _because_ I saw your father sneak out of the house. I ended up tailing him up Valkyrie Cliffs."

"Valkyrie-"

"Yes, the cemetery, Hiccup. Your mother's grave."

Hiccup paused, felt the kids gather closer around them, didn't really mind if he had to tell them the whole Story. Their torchlights together glowed upon them brighter, and Hiccup could see the streaks of concern on Astrid's face, drawn in shadows and orange light, the shiny walls of the cave around them glinting with inconstant facets of reflections. "But what does that have to do with me?" he asked.

She gathered her breath, wiped a bang from her face and pushed it behind her ear. "Brace yourself, Hiccup." She looked at him, lowered the torch. "Apparently someone wanted to kill you a long time ago."

"Huh?" came a chorus of voices, transformed into a humming crowd in the cavern. Hiccup just stared at her, blinked. "What was that?"

"Trust me, I hoped I was just dreaming, but I swear I wasn't. It was your Dad, and he said, 'Hiccup just wouldn't be killed, would he?' " She paused, flicked the torchlight, made a shivering pattern of shadow over her face. "It's wrecking the thunder out of me, what it means."

"Sure he didn't mean, like _Rune_ maybe?" Hiccup quipped, thinking about the Story for an objective moment. For some reason, he wasn't really feeling her panic right now. It was just too unbelievable. Who'd want to kill _him_ of all people? Hiccup cringed his upper lip, brought an arm up and rubbed the back of his neck. "Did you ask him what he meant?"

"Ask _him?_" Astrid's torchlight moved around erratically. "Ha!" The cave laughed, _ha, ha_. The hanging creatures on the walls glowed suddenly, as if afraid. "No way. You should have seen him there, musing by the cliff. I never saw him like that. It scared me."

Hiccup inhaled. Looks like this business with Rune was getting too much for Dad. Did what happened still affect them that much? Sure, _he_ was shocked when he heard about it, still smarted to think of someone intentionally trying to murder his father, but for someone to whom it happened, what? Twenty years ago?

"What does it mean, Hiccup?" Astrid's voice came out again, honestly prodding, echoing gently now, like the murmur of a stream.

He put his arms out exasperatedly. "Ah, maybe it's related to what happened between Dad and his brother? The guy on the ships." The last sentence repeated itself in the air.

Snotlout suddenly blurted, "Wait, you're Dad's _brother_ is on the ships we've been seeing?" _been seeing, been seeing._

Hiccup turned, saw Snotlout crossing his arms, a mix of surprise and

chiding in his voice. "That's the one I heard Dad say was banished, right?" Snotlout asked, looking up around the cave as it spat his words back at him. "Would this cave just shut up?" he shouted, making it do anything but.

Hiccup eyed the faceted ceiling, 'watching' the sound play around them. "That's the one," he said.

"Well, what about him?" Tuffnut stepped forward. "What's this got to do with Hiccup?" He jabbed a hand in Hiccup's direction, as his name reverberated in the air.

"I have no idea," Hiccup sighed. "All I know is, wellâ€¦" He tried to put the whole Story together. "Seems like my mom and my dad's brother were close, way back when they were young, and there was, well, there wasâ€¦" He looked up, at the kids who were listening closely, at Astrid, a confused anger in her eyes. "Rune tried to kill my father for her. Basically." He swallowed, grateful the cave decided to shut up for once.

"Well, looks like we got some big problems," Astrid sighed, leaning on her left leg. "Because that's the other thing I wanted to say. The ships are already in the harbor."

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Hiccup stumbled out of the cave, impatient somehow while at the same time irritated, curious, worried. If only he could meet his Dad before the strangers. But where was Gobber?

The kids suddenly skidded to a halt. Hiccup glanced around, at the ferns and moss-covered rocks and the green lush conifers and the bright clouded sky above. Down the path of rock and tan dirt, the gray gravel scattered to the sides and the indentation in the middle where years of travel had taken place. Hiccup sighed, gave his sword to Fishlegs. The thing was too heavy to run with. "I need to find my Dad." He started off, flying down the path. It took him almost a whole month to learn how to run with his prosthetic, but now that he could, he managed to only smart as the metal hit stone.

"Hey, wait up!" Astrid shouted far behind him.

He hadn't gotten much more than a hundred yards before he saw them - Dad, Gobber, Astrid's mother Phlegma, Snotlout's father Spitelout, the rest of the War Council, even some townsfolk who looked happy and curious and very much innocent. And thenâ€¦ strangers. Faces that looked hard and weary, dirty and almost emotionless. Several wore capes that swung behind them grandly, buckled with swords that hung long from their waists, decked with golden orbs of jewelry and colored ropes of every description, gold bands and bone necklaces, helmets covered with fabric, scales, and shards of metal. And the one girl in the lead. The white-caped girl he saw back on the ships. He caught his breath.

His father advanced suddenly, reached Hiccup before the others. "Son!" he panted heavily, and Hiccup noted wryly that his dad was no spring chicken anymore. Hiccup did what he could to steady his father's big form. "Slow down, Dad, just breathe. What is it?" He peeked over his father's big arm and looked at the girl again, somehow captivated.

In an awful way; he didn't like it.

His father finally caught his breath, stood up tall and steadied himself. "Son, I want you to meet your cousin. My brother's daughter." He caught Hiccup up in his big arm and swept him towards the crowd on the path. "Ahh-" Hiccup grunted, as his feet were virtually lifted off the ground. I wish Dad wouldn't do that anymore! It made him feel five years old.

Stoick dropped him in front of the gathering crowd. Hiccup eyed them warily, eyes darting to each member, trying to keep his feelings hidden. Because it did look like his father trusted these people.

Which one was Rune?

His father put a hand on Hiccup's shoulder and Hiccup looked up at him through his huge red beard. He was so happy it unnerved him. "Dad?" he asked, jabbing his arm lightly just to make sure he wasn't in some upside-down world. "Who are they?"

His father, still beaming, gestured to them largely. "The Skirra VÃ©l, my brother's tribe." He put both hands on Hiccup's shoulders. "This is my son, Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third." All eyes went down to him.

Hiccup hummed something random that probably nobody heard, then puckered up. "Hi," he said, and suddenly felt the rest of the kids behind him, settle down on the dirt path. Astrid moved up alongside him, and he looked at her, watched her gaze scan the new tribe with a thin, critical eye.

"And, Hiccup," his father said grandly, "this is Rune's daughter, future chieftess of the tribe. Her name is Heather."

Hiccup looked at the girl with the white cape. There was something deep and hidden in her eyes. Her black hair was strangely unbraided and her thin, spare outfit wrapped around her body like a black cat's skin. The sparkling white bear's cape hung down from her shoulders, the stone epaulets painted with a pattern beautifully ornate and obscure.

She didn't step forward, but just looked at him, her eyes traveling down him, the shock of red hair, the little brown fur coat, the edges of the green tunic that stuck out from underneath. Her eyes rested lightly on the foot, the left foot.

"You must be something special," she said, not taking her eyes off that left foot. She paused, looked up again and smiled at her Council. "We came all this way to meet you."

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How long will the charade last? she thought briskly, watching the little boy with the red hair and the metal leg, as they walked towards the Great Hall for the lavish feast the Hooligan chief had decided to bestow upon his guests. She could tell Stoick was in a hurry to get the past over with, and to move on. A noble thought, of course, but it could never be. But she humored him, because that was

the plan. Feign love and make the betrayal more real, for that was how it happened almost twenty years ago.

She dropped further behind the rest of the people advancing through the forest, came alongside the boy, tried to analyze him, look into his eyes, tried to discover, out of a sudden, real curiosity that she found hard to explain in herself

What did Valla see in the boy?

9. Chapter 8: Meeting the Skirra Vål

a/n: Finally we see Heather and her tribe at Berk! Other conflicts get explored as well. Enjoy!

View the illustration at the official webpage. Put a period where the dashes are: [howtotrainyourdragon2 - thecomicseries - com](http://howtotrainyourdragon2-thecomicseries-com)
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><p>How to Train Your Dragon II
>The Dragon Whisperer

****Chapter 8****

****Meeting the Skirra Vål****

She'd prepared herself already for this moment, for looking into the kid's eyes without flinching.

He colored slightly as she stared at him and she turned away quickly, didn't want to break cover.

The Hooligan chief was talking boisterously over the assembled masses in the Great Hall of the tribe, his voice so deep and booming, so familiar, so like her father, when he was in war and sane, when he was raiding and had something else besides the pain to think about. She hadn't wanted to think about her father while she was here. It would make her mad, frustrated, irritated. She'd wanted to put him out of her mind, how horrible that may sound, but only for their own good, that they might carry out this plan without the chance of her

she hated to admit it the chance she might break down.

She took a deep breath, looked at the boy Hiccup, really looked at him this time, from across the table as the Chief seated them and continued talking. How could such a small thing be the cause of so much misery, how could the fact of his existence cause such death and hopelessness, a screaming melancholy that reached even into her heart and started making her feel warm inside, like the fire of an unquenched storm. She looked away from the boy, took a deep breath. Her hand moved to the curved sword still hanging from her waist. Once he was done with, the war would start. She only had to give the signal. Dad was ready. Her whole tribe was ready.

It would be the final battle.

She looked at him, the boy cringing and smiling like he didn't mean

it. A strange nemesis.

Get to know him, his patterns, be kind, be interested. Let Stoick be as surprised as I was when Valla died.

Those were her father's parting words to her, before he kissed her on her forehead and pulled her into the hug that always spoke more than words could.

When I come back, will you finally be well?

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Hiccup let out a huge, long breath. Okay, this night was not going to be one of his favorites. Dad had cordoned him off from the other kids (in the excuse of looking "grown-up" in front of the visitors) and had insisted he make some kind of speech about his dragon-training skills, the same way Stoick had his council members right now gab about their great personal Quests. I guess that was part of chieftaining, showing off your tribe.

Hiccup looked afar into the crowd, found Astrid and glanced made an expression, hoping for sympathy, got back a big-eyed shrug. He sighed. How am I supposed to compose a speech on the fly? He looked around. Luckily it wasn't his turn yet. The Council was still talking, specifically Astrid's mom Phlegma the Fierce. He snuck away from the main body of the crowd and slumped down in a chair in a nook in the room, which happened to be a nice dark spot where Fishleg's dragon was snoozing.

"Hey there, Meatlug," Hiccup cooed, leaning over and scratching the Gronckle on the forehead. The dragon gave off a snore, didn't open her eyes. "Yeah," Hiccup sighed, "I think you have the right idea there. Sleep's a great getaway, isn't it? Puts your mind at ease." He leaned over in the chair, put his elbows on his knees. "Though I haven't been exactly getting so much of it. Staying up late making the ship, you know. I'm calling it the Night Fury. I think Toothless won't mind, would he? I doubt he'd get confused." He laughed, still watching the dragon, who was pleasantly not paying attention. Hiccup leaned up, sat into the back of the chair. Dragons were so much easier to talk to.

He looked out again, over the expanse of faces and subtle decorations that adorned the Hall, near the doorway the huge pillars of stone carved out in the shape of famous ancestors, black and threatening, gazing forlornly at the unpleasant jollity below. The huge banners that hung wide and low from the ceiling whose top he couldn't even see in the enveloping blackness. The stone walls that glowed a warm and pleasant orange from the fire lamps that stood around the hall's edge. The ridges of carvings on the wall, the one huge pattern swirling on the wall just behind the great fire and table pit in the center of the room. And the wide pillars of wood dotting the Hall, the one great pillar to the right of him, the grain of wood indented with a criss-cross of black, and the lower portion, girdled with metal bands. Way up high new black fabric banners swung joyfully down into the crowd, creating sharp shadows around the Hall and shielding him from much of the light in this spot in the corner.

Another Council member was having his say next, his voice wide and booming across the Hall. Hiccup watched as Phlegma stepped away from

the center of attention and wander over to Spitelout. The two of them shared a smile and began chatting. They were pretty close, Hiccup thought randomly, and no wonder, seeing how Astrid's Dad was Spitelout's buddy back in the day.

His eye wandered over to the new folks, the Skirra VÃ©lites. One of them was eyeing Astrid's Nadder with an indignantly wary look, like he wasn't sure how to deal with a tempered fear. Hiccup's brow furrowed. He had almost forgotten that these people weren't used to tame dragons. He found his father's shape in the masses, wondered if he was going to deal with the matter. But Stoick was busy introducing more people to one another. But that was understandable. I'm the dragon kid, so I should be dealing with that.

He stood up. "Well, I guess it's my turn, right, bud?" He turned around, expected to see Toothless there, but only found the snoring Meatlug. His ear caught a sound he found familiar somewhere in the masses. _Toothless._ He looked up, but couldn't see above the crowd. He plunged into the chatting masses, dodged one huge Viking after another. It was a continual source of wonder to him how all these giants were somehow still his relatives. His metal leg clapped on the stone floor and he squinted to see in the dim light from the glowing firelights that lined the room.

He finally stumbled out into an open space in the Hall, jolted onto his heels when he saw Toothless haunched on the ground, hissing and squinting up at the girl of the Skirra VÃ©l, Heather. She was staring down the dragon questioningly, one thin eyebrow raised and one hand on the curved sword that slung beautifully from her waist. It was a showdown and Toothless knew it. Several members of the Skirra VÃ©l were gathering now, and even a couple of the dragons were assembling, as if something was coming to a head.

"Hey, what's going on?" Hiccup said quickly, stepping up to Toothless, looking up at Heather. She flashed her eyes at him, took a deep breath and continued looking at the Night Fury. Hiccup's eyes were mainly focused on the hand on her sword, and he felt Toothless sense it as well, as the dragon stared at it closely. "He's not going to hurt you," Hiccup said firmly, watching her hand tighten quickly on the handle then ease as her eyes moved now to him.

She put her hand down, and the curved sword slipped into a more vertical position from her belt. "Of course not." Her body was still tense, though, and he stepped forward once, his hand on Toothless, who he still could feel was growling quietly behind him.

She eyed him as he neared, avoided his eyes and watched the hand he put out to her gently.

She locked eyes with him tersely. "You understand that we kill those things where I come from," she said, briskly.

Hiccup inhaled and nodded once, kept back a grunt of horror. Most everyone had no scruples about killing dragons, and he couldn't save them all - yet. "I know that," he said, swallowing. "Things are different here. We've made friends with them."

She straightened, swished her black hair, and looked over her fellow tribesmen who had been watching the match with nervous interest. She opened her mouth to say something, when a big voice interrupted.

Hiccup jerked up. Dad. His great authoritative form hulked into the space and his beard crinkled as the sum of the situation settled itself into his mind. He glanced briefly at his son, a look Hiccup couldn't quite interpret as approval or not, then back at Heather.

"Your place at the table is ready," he said, and Heather turned, swooshed the cape again. Hiccup fell back a bit, turned to Toothless and stroked the dragon's head thoughtfully. Toothless was still tense, eyeing the passing Skirra VÃ©lites with a low, heavy growl. Hiccup followed his eyes, saw them resting on the jewelry of teeth and dragon spikes, and on the few heads which wore horned helmets dabbed with round and jagged scales. "Shhh, Toothless," Hiccup whispered gently, stroking his neck. "They're not going to be killing anyone here, you're okay." Toothless stopped growling a moment, looked up at Hiccup and blinked. He growled tighter and sharper at him, gave his head a sharp back-and-forth.

For once, Hiccup didn't quite know what Toothless was trying to say.

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By the time Gobber rounded him up to the table by his father, Stoick was making a speech about the grand future he was envisioning for the tribe. Hiccup slipped into the seat on the right side of his father, saw that Heather was sitting on Stoick's left, and the kids, well, they were somewhere in the far corner, away from the rest of the adults. He cringed slightly, beginning to hear things like "Hiccup's orders" and "Hiccup's role" in this or that. _What_ was his father doing? I've never given an order beyond what I had to in Gobber's class. And it certainly didn't impress Dad _that_ much. Sure he encouraged him, but almost half-heartedly, because when they were alone in the house at night, and there wasn't anybody to pretend to, he could sense that his father was still disappointed.

So then was he trying to impress these people to such an extent he'd actually border on lying? He was tempted to reach out and touch his father's big arm, ask him what in the world was he doing. His father seemed to sense that, turned down and looked at Hiccup for a moment, before he went again to extolling the wonders of his tribe and his future heir, looking at the Skirra VÃ©lite girl, a pleased sigh breathing out of him.

It hit Hiccup inexplicably. Dad _admired_ Heather. He looked at the girl again, saw her composed countenance, gazing out over the Hall, eyes wary and observant of everything, flicking from her Council to the dragons that hummed and wandered through the crowds. He looked at the Council members, the way they looked up to her, took cues from her subtle gestures, respected her with a formality he never saw on Berk.

But he could never be that kind of Chief. Didn't Dad see that?

Hiccup leaned forward, suddenly realized the people were looking at him, because Dad kept talking about him and for some reason the praise, though not really as exaggerated as he feared, was unwarranted nonetheless and he couldn't stand it. "Dad," he hissed, trying not to get his father embarrassed.

Stoick leaned down closer to Hiccup, maybe got the message and had mercy. He stood up, the chair behind him squeaking as it gritted on the stone. The sound repeated itself throughout the Hall, as a hundred and more slid out of their seats to mirror the Chief's motions, raising their mugs. Hiccup looked at his father, saw the great mead mug raised high in his right hand, and the sound of a booming toast coming forth clear through the air. "To these two tribes!" he said, and Hiccup picked up the mug of mead somebody put by his plate. He father looked down at his son, then to Heather. "May the past be forgotten and a new leaf be built around the peace and equality of our descendants and our brotherhood." He lifted his mug. Mugs went up around the Hall, held up high. Stoick let out a deep cheer and the tribe joined in.

"Bottoms up!" someone screamed from somewhere in the Hall. Hiccup rolled his eyes. Gobber

Hiccup sat down, put the mug aside and took the smaller clay cup filled with water, drank it. Mead did strange things to people, and he wasn't going to take his first taste now, when he needed to pay attention. He looked over at Heather, found her already looking at him. In a horridly deep and piercing way. He blinked away. He somehow got the feeling like he was something interesting to her.

I hope all that stuff Dad's been saying about me is not going to make her think I'm something. He shrunk back in his chair, took a deep breath.

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Astrid could barely see Hiccup from across the Hall. She knew the day would come when Stoick would start taking up even more of Hiccup's time, making him a Council member and all that. Her dragon tried to nudge her and get some attention. "Not now, Stormfly," she said, trying to push her head out of her line of sight, leaning up from her table with the rest of the teens. Stormfly continued to prod, and she sighed exasperatedly. "Okay, fine." She flung the smoked fish on her plate into the air and Stormfly flapped her wings slightly, caught it and hummed pleasantly, gulping it down.

"_Now_ will you stop bothering me?" Astrid leaned out of her seat and stared at her. "I've got a boyfriend to look after." Stormfly finally got the message and hopped away into a dark corner. She leaned to the side, tried again to see Hiccup through the crowd.

"What are they doing now?" Ruffnut poked her, tried to look through the same hole between two bobbing Viking helmets. Fishlegs peeked over, a little quiet in all the revelry that evening, without Hiccup to talk dragons with.

"The girl, what's-her-name-" Astrid snapped her fingers.

"Heather," Snotlout piped.

"You'd notice." Astrid looked slyly at him.

"No, it's just that Dad told me. She means nothing to me."

"Oh, sure." She loved to tease him.

"Okay, maybe a little. Come on, she's a beauty, you got to admit." He nudged Tuffnut.

"Oh!" Tuffnut got his nose out of the mug of mead he'd been nursing since the whole celebration began. "Yeah, she looks okay."

"Is that all you have to say for the fairer sex?"

Tuffnut snorted, went back to his mug.

Ruffnut flayed her arms about. "Forget about those guys! Tell me what you see." She butted up against Astrid.

Astrid was still smiling, went back and looked through the clearing in the Vikings. "Okay, Heather is talking. And Hiccup-" She leaned to the left. "Okay, Hiccup is poking around his food again."

Ruffnut laughed. "The kid can't get enough energy. No wonder he can't even hold his sword."

Astrid turned around, gave her a dirty look.

"Oh, all right." Ruffnut leaned back, put her palms up. "Hands off your man, I know."

Astrid continued to glare at her.

She slumped. "Aaaaaand I'm sorry. There?"

Astrid smiled smugly.

"Now what else is happening?" Ruffnut poked her again.

Astrid peered between the heads, pursed her lips. What was with Heather, looking at Hiccup like that?

"Well?" came Ruffnut.

"Heather's been staring at Hiccup. All evening, really."

"Ha! How interesting." It was Snotlout.

"What's so interesting?" Astrid shot him another sharp look.

"This triangle thing going on," Snotlout said through an irrepressible grin, tracing his finger through Astrid and the two people way up far away there with Stoick. He crossed his arms, laughed. "Got you, Astrid."

"She doesn't mean anything to him," Astrid huffed, raising her nose at him sharply. She looked back through the heads, found Hiccup peering at Heather from under his bangs. Heather swung the black hair that was way too vivacious, and stood up. Hiccup's eyes followed her. Stoick was getting up now, mug in hand again.

"Oh no, it's another toast," Astrid said, grabbed the nearest mug. "Get up, Tuffnut," she shot at the bleary shape lolling at the corner of the table. They all stood.

Stoick's booming voice came clear across the Hall. Everyone hushed. Even the fabric banners seemed to pause in the drifting air above the smoking fires.

"In gratitude to my brother," he said, a slight crack in his large voice, "who for these many years has been banished for deeds long since forgotten, and whom I will soon meet, I declare now, as Chief of this tribe and representative of its people, that I pardon his actions and clear his-" His words were suddenly drowned in a sea of applause. Astrid could hear gasps of wonder around her, and even her mother was patting her father with a look of pleasant surprise. Stoick closed his mouth, held his mug with a pride and an almost tearful joy. He bobbed his head down, up again, put his hand out to calm the crowd. "And for him and for his beautiful daughter," he said, louder again, "I give a gift of ten fine dragons, to ride and enjoy for all their lives."

A cheer went up from the crowd again.

"And more than that," Stoick boomed, "I give them my son-"

Her head jolted back. Hiccup was staring at Stoick, eyes popped open.

"-as personal trainer throughout their visit here, so they can know the pleasure of flying on their new dragons." Stoick raised his big mug and the crowd followed suit. A rolling cheer went up, and even Hookfang, Belchbarf, and the other dragons around the hall got caught up in the excitement. Even little baby dragons from the last nesting season were throating happy noises.

Astrid sipped a bit of the mead, sat back down.

"Well, that was nothing much," Tuffnut slurred, flopping back down. He raised his mug, about to-

Astrid grabbed it suddenly from across the table, held it as Tuffnut's hand was still on the handle. "Stop it with the mead, all right. Didn't you see what just happened?"

"What? That the Rune dude tried to kill him once? And now Stoick is being extra nice to him?" He pulled on the cup. Astrid didn't let go.

"Stoick is pardoning him, guys." She addressed all of them, tried to make them see the gravity of that.

Ruffnut sighed. "Well, I guess Stoick is really going all out for his brother."

Fishlegs tapped a leg bone on his empty plate. "Well, if I was Stoick and I had a brother that came back to his tribe after a terrible fall out, I might be a little magnanimous."

Snotlout and Tuffnut and Ruffnut gave him weird looks.

"Magnanimous," Fishlegs repeated.

Astrid tuned out, stood up to talk to Hiccup, despite the whole

separation idea. She needed to talk to him, get this thing in perspective. Hiccup would know what to make of it, maybe tell her what Stoick was thinking. The whole development struck a wrong chord with her, and she didn't quite know why.

I mean, forgiveness is a good thing, right?

Maybe it felt like Stoick was moving too fast.

Where's Hiccup? People were standing up now, and she couldn't see. She tiptoed, looked between the helmets. It must be the end of the party. Stoick and Heather weren't in their places. Hiccup was nowhere to be found. She pushed through the crowd. "Hiccup!" she called, but everyone was talking now and a general blur of voices was falling over the Hall. She looked between the arm muscles and big fur capes for the little bobbing head of auburn hair. But it was getting harder to move now, because people were crowding into a corner of the Hall, excited chatting rising up through the air and the purring sound of ten fine dragons generating from somewhere in the deepest part of the mass.

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Heather could tell the boy was uncomfortable, all through the evening at dinner. At least the feeling was mutual. A couple times she had to eye reminders to her people, to tell them she was still in control, that it wouldn't be long now. She'd have to kill him before his Induction, that much was planned by her father and her.

She'd discussed with her father whether he wanted to see his brother Stoick and join in the deception, but he'd said, no, it wasn't necessary. It was too much on his nerves already, anyway, and she wasn't going to risk his dying from the pressure. So she'd told the Hooligan chief that Rune would be meeting him at Induction Day itself. That made the idea sound like a special celebration or reunion, which was sure to fill Stoick with happy thoughts and let his guard down. But the boy— She looked at Hiccup again, as they left their seats and meandered to where the gift dragons were being assembled in the far space of the Hall, the chairs and tables all moved aside and space made for the her and her Council to admire their new charges.

The boy was an unknown factor.

She watched him wander quietly from the group, try to make himself vanish into the crowds. She heard Stoick's voice say something up ahead of her and she jolted to focus again. She had an idea on how to get close to the boy, and maybe even finish the job tonight. She'd have to discuss something with Stoick.

The little kid had disappeared totally into the crowds by now. Something crept up her spine and she suddenly realized she shouldn't call him a kid or a boy or a child anymore. He was almost her age now, and— Her hand moved to her sword inadvertently and she swallowed.

Calling him that would make it so much harder.

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Hiccup was in a hurry to get to Toothless after the dinner ended and people were finally spreading throughout the Hall. It was just too much pressure to sit there and wonder about all the ways things could go wrong. He slipped away as his father and Heather marched onwards towards the gift dragon assembly. A nice subtle move, he thought happily and searched the edge of the Hall for his dragon.

"Toothless!" he called softly, more to himself than for any real purpose. He wandered through the mass of people, their cheerful hums a background blur, and snippets of their conversations floating through his head.

"â€|but of course they're new here what did you expectâ€|"

"You mean the dragons? Now thatâ€|"

"â€|a tamed beast. It's still going to scare you."

Hiccup finally found the black dragon in the far corner of the Hall. He smiled suddenly, just to see him, rushed over to where the dragon was lying on the stone floor, eyes closed gently and head resting on his little feet. "Hey, Toothless," he whispered, touching the black scales on his head. Toothless opened his big green eyes, blinked them and, seeing Hiccup, jerked his head up and hummed, nudged his face into Hiccup's chest. "Yeah, buddy," Hiccup coached, scratching and letting the dragon nuzzle him.

Suddenly Hiccup got a strange feeling inside of him. Like they were being watched. He whirled, saw a man standing over him, an old man, wrinkled skin, balding head, hands that had been used and used well. A strange little mark adorned the left side of his head, near his ear, and Hiccup couldn't quite make it out. This man was one from the other tribe, but he hadn't seen him up the walk from Firebrand Peaks, nor at the dinner. He did not wear the adornment of the other members of the tribe, nor did he wear a cape or lavish belt. He only wore a plain fur coat and a simple, practical gray tunic. Hiccup looked up at his face, saw a silent look of awe, as the stranger stared down at Toothless.

"Sir?" Hiccup asked.

The man did not move, continued gazing at Toothless. The people milling in the immediate vicinity suddenly grew extremely quiet and made vague gestures to the old man. A Skirra VÃ©llite began to step towards them.

The man was still staring at Toothless and Hiccup could feel his dragon stiffen. He didn't want a repeat of the Heather incident. Hiccup slid off the ground and got to his feet. "Is something wrong?" He eyed the man, half of his attention on the odd behavior of the Skirra VÃ©llites around.

"Shh," the old man said, wistfully, raising a hand. He closed his eyes, opened them again with a renewed amazement. "It's been so long since I saw a dragon like this." The old man looked at Hiccup suddenly and there was a sense of age and history in his dark gray eyes. "I had to come inside and see this. A Night Fury, a real life Fury, alive."

Toothless suddenly reacted, opened his eyes wide and growled questioningly at the old man, poked his nose up at him. The old man

paused, tense to find the dragon so near him. "The last time I saw one of this kind, he was dead." Hiccup started slightly. "Dead, killed," the old man continued, "from the Death Spiral."

Toothless burst out with a growl, shook his head violently from side to side. Hiccup put his hands on Toothless' head, looked at the old man, confused. "The what?"

The old man's voice rose and his crinkled fingers made a swirling motion upward towards the dark ceiling. "It only happens between Night Furies and Skrills. They smack into each other at full speed-" He smacked his hands together, let the fingers grasp and twist and wrest each other. "They fight." The cracked, dirty nails dug into his skin. "They scream." He balled his fists tightly, vibrated them with a passion. "The Spiral creates its own weather, its own storm of swirling air and lightning, the Night Fury's wings and the Skrill's lightning." The old man's knuckles began to pale with the growing passion of his words. "A white funnel of light as they tumble to their deaths." He suddenly let his hands fall, opened them and let them fall to his sides.

Hiccup opened his eyes wide and inhaled slowly. He looked back at Toothless, found the green eyes hot and livid. Not at the old man, not even at something in the room. The anger was somewhere inside. "Why do they fight?" Hiccup asked.

"It's an old feud, been going on for generations on my island, before the volcano erupted, before the Skirra VÃ©l came, before-"

"_Shut up_, Hervi."

Hiccup whirled at the stark, sharp voice. It was a Skirra VÃ©lite council member. The giant warrior pushed himself between Hiccup and the old man, grinned and bordered on suffocating Hiccup with one big arm around his shoulders. "Pardon the slaves, they like making up stories."

Hiccup started. Slave. The word sparked inside him, and he looked up at the old man again, saw the mark on the side of his head and finally figured out what it was. A brand mark. He blinked.

The giant Skirra VÃ©lite laughed hugely, swept Hiccup away from Hervi and sauntered forward through the Hall, bragging to the surrounding Hooligans about the slaves he owned and how the Skirra VÃ©l had made such a name for themselves in the trading business. Hiccup cowered under the big man in horror. Spitelout, his Dad's own right-hand man, was bantering with the slavetrader. "We haven't been raiding much lately, as a matter of fact," Spitelout laughed, and Hiccup got the horrid notion that he was apologizing for something. Was he somehow afraid of this big man's behavior, tried to "fit in" with this slave business? Or did he really approve of this?

Suddenly he realized how little he knew of his own tribe. They just never needed to discuss slavery for themselves, because they never had to subjugate anyone, and apparently banishment was good enough a punishment, and none of _them_ certainly needed any farm hands. They always worked together.

Slavery.

The word now gave him a vivid disgust, instead of a fear. He got himself out of the crowd, away from the trader and from Spitelout and the others. A woman from his tribe, a mother, accosted Hiccup suddenly, and he looked down at the woman's daughter, who was biting her nails and staring at Hervi. The mother murmured quietly. "Please tell Stoick to keep the slaves outside." The child, her eyes wide, nodded up at him. "Please," she said, very small.

Hiccup breathed heavily. "I- I'll see what I can do." He stepped back and broke from her grasp. He didn't look back and set off through the people. Not looking for Dad.

Just where did Hervi go?

He spied the old man finally on the outskirts of the crowd, kneeling beside Toothless in that corner of the Hall, the dragon eyeing him with a tentative curiosity. Hervi hovered his hand over the black beast's wings, the membranes stretching long and dark and lovely across his back and tail.

Hiccup stopped in front of them and Hervi looked up, rose his eyes and met Hiccup's.

Hiccup inhaled. "How did you become a slave?" The word had a hard time coming out.

"Slave?" Hervi smiled poignantly.

Hiccup slid down on the stone floor, knelt by Toothless, faced the man.

The old man hummed, finally setting his hand down and stroking Toothless. "I was once Herkja's chief, you know."

Hiccup turned to him sharply. His brain registered someone calling his name in the background somewhere, but Hiccup wasn't about to pay attention to that. "Chief?" he mouthed, deliberately.

"Herkja was my island before the Skirra Völ took advantage of the destruction of our people from the volcano."

"You mean Rune?" Hiccup looked at the mark on the left side of the man's face, the burned, brown flesh in a gentle snaking shape just in front of his ear. He swallowed. Dad had once told him about tribes that were subjugated, how some raiders had the chief branded to prevent him from ever taking over again. _Once a slave, always a slave. And a slave could never be chief._

He swallowed again, this topic making him uneasy, and blankly watched Hervi's hand stroking Toothless, gently, reverently. "Take care of this dragon," he hummed suddenly. "The Skirra Völ have a tradition of hunting down the best dragon of an island."

"Hunting down?" Hiccup heard his name again, clearer this time, and he realized it was his father. "What do you mean?" he insisted. Hervi looked at him.

"A prize for subjugating the tribe, I guess."

"_Hiccup!_" The name came over hot and clear this time, accompanied

by a sharp hum of voices and a dragon's screech. Hiccup got to his feet, still staring at Hervi, then at Toothless, still wanting to know what this meant, what Hervi meant. "I need to talk with you again," he said and stepped back, mumbling, "Coming, Dad." Stoick's form emerged from the crowd. Hervi suddenly set his eyes on Hiccup sharply, realization welling up over his face. "You're the Chief's son?"

Hiccup opened his eyes at him. "Well, yeah."

The old man withheld a gasp.

Hervi rose suddenly, got a look like he was searching, deciding, wondering if he should say something. "Are you all right?" Hiccup asked, the tumult increasing behind him, his father calling again.

Hervi wavered, looked away from Hiccup's eyes. "Just be careful." He put a hand on Hiccup's shoulder suddenly, crossed his brows and then stepped away, shaking his head.

Hiccup looked after him, confused. Hervi disappeared into the sea of Hooligans, heading for the door, just as a pair of giant palms grabbed Hiccup's arm and yanked him backwards.

Hiccup whirled, faced his Dad staring down at him and dragging him across the stone floor. Breath seethed out from under his red beard. "_Where_ have you been?" Hiccup tried opening his mouth, but before he could ask anything, his Dad threw him in front of a bunch of Skirra VÃ©lites and Hooligans and a Nadder and an axe-wielding-

"Hey!" Hiccup screamed. A council member of the Skirra VÃ©l was in the motion of swinging his axe right towards Stormfly's nose, and the dragon was promptly revealing a splay of teeth, her head and opened jaws heading straight for him. Hiccup jumped, skidded between them and flashed his hands out on either side. "_Stop!_" he screamed. He voiced the heaviest pitch he could muster. "What's going on here?" He looked to the right, jerked his head back a little, the crisp edge of the axehead just grazing his bangs. He stared straight into a grimy-faced, dragon-tooth-necklaced Skirra VÃ©lite still fuming and clutching his weapon and hissing insults at him. "You soup-brained barnacled Hooli-"

"_You're_ the scallop-head!" It was Astrid. Hiccup twisted to the left: Astrid was clutching Stormfly's neck, barely holding her dragon back as she spat her own attacks past Hiccup to the axe-wielder on his right. Her one unhidden eye was livid.

"Stormfly would _never_ do that."

"That killer almost bit my hand off."

"She only wanted some fi-"

"You think dragons can be tamed! I'll show-"

"_STOP!_" Hiccup screamed and the insults halted in midair. Hiccup's throat hurt hard; he wondered if that booming voice really belonged to him. People were panting and staring at him. His father was tense,

and Heather was ready to pounce forward, her sword flashing in her right hand. "Everybody, just-" Hiccup started.

A sharp snarl startled Hiccup from behind.

"Brandr!" Heather called out suddenly, but the Skirra VÃ©lite was already leaping backwards as his axe flew straight out of his grip, the jaws of a black dragon uprooting the entire weapon from the warrior's white-knuckled hands.

"Toothless!" Hiccup gasped, smiling, his arms still stretched out wide. His dragon was by his side, his mouth full of axe as his teeth clamped down on the pockmarked metal. His big green eyes were round and wide again as they gazed at Hiccup and hummed, the double-headed weapon crudely sticking out of either side of his mouth. He let out a snarl to the right for good measure, but his eyes were full of exhilaration as he jumped up and down, his sleek black body glinting back the firelights of the Great Hall.

Hiccup almost laughed but had to smother it inside himself. "Good job, buddy," he said, winking. Toothless was clearly exulting over the masterful disarmament. The Skirra VÃ©lite warrior, Brandr, was glaring at the dragon as if he had stolen the shirt off his chest. He pounded up to Toothless, tried grabbing the handle, but Toothless jerked his head back deftly out of reach and swished the handle in the air until the warrior blushed at the inadvertent game of tag.

Some laughter arose from the younger-aged cross-section of the Hooligan side and Hiccup cringed suddenly. Brandr turned as bright purple as humanly possibly. Heather stepped up to Toothless, her curved sword to her side, but her eyes watchful on the dragon. Hiccup stepped in her direction, got between her and Toothless.

"You're sure you can control that beast?" she said smoothly.

"He's not hurting anyone," Hiccup snapped.

Toothless roared suddenly through his full mouth, held the axe up high and jabbed the handle towards Hiccup in a smug triumph. Hiccup could hear Heather smile behind him, and he looked back, saw an ironically amused look on her face. Hiccup looked desperately around as his dragon offered him the weapon of a Skirra VÃ©lite council member in the middle of the Great Hall of the Hooligans. "Stop glorying in this, Toothless!" he hissed quietly, "You're making it worse, especially for me."

But Brandr was clearly already scandalized. "Look at this. The heir taking the side of a dragon, a _dragon!_"

Stoick started an objection, met by Skirra VÃ©lite response, and a growingly accusatory buzz began in the Hall. Hiccup held out his hands towards the crowd and tried to wave them down to silence. "I'm not taking any sides, guys. Both of you should've kept your cool." He looked to Brandr, to Stormfly and Astrid.

He directed his gaze at Astrid, tried to look both gentle and firm. "I know Stormfly likes a fish thrown to her at dinnertime, but the Skirra VÃ©lites wouldn't have known that. They only know dragons as killers. Just watch her more when there are strangers, okay? We all

got to make a better effort to guard our dragons' behavior."

He winced a bit as Astrid's jaw dropped and her eyebrows shot up in a glare, then smoothed quietly. She remained silent. A critical murmur arose among the Hooligans, hasty whispers and craning heads eying him sharply. The murmur from the Skirra VÃ©lites was more positive, which made the Hooligan murmurs only more biting.

But at least Astrid isn't biting my head off- yet. Now for the other one.

He turned to Brandr. The fellow appeared to be almost savoring this now, to get some sort of win over the Hooligans and their indomitable dragons. Hiccup gave him the same look as he gave Astrid, except pointedly firmer, with some appropriate arm gestures for support. "I'm sorry this happened to you, sir. It's not easy to eat dinner with a bunch of fire-breathing reptiles, but when we say that dragons are at peace with us, you've got to take our word for it. You can't just lop off the heads of our friends as you please." His hand splayed out for emphasis and the big man bulged his offended eyes at him, as if horrified to receive this kind of verbal treatment from such a shrimp, no matter _who_ he was in the tribe. The man looked at his own tribe and, armed with their support, he stared down Hiccup with a disdain that matched his size.

Hiccup stared into the hot big eyes, all the authoritativeness he'd built up winding out of him. _Oh, great, I've always needed this. Two tribes hating me._

Toothless throatied support, the axe now comically wobbling in his mouth as the dragon tickled his legs with the carved handle tip. Hiccup patted Toothless's snout, took the handle from the dragon's mouth. "Thanks bud, for being on _my_ side."

He grunted as the heavy weapon tipped itself to the floor. He hobbled it upward towards the man, a low sound emanating from Toothless's throat as Hiccup handed the axe over. The man took the weapon and Hiccup soothed Toothless. "It's okay, bud, everything's under control." The humming growl sound subsided, yet remained latent.

"You're just lucky no blood spilled tonight." The big man whipped around, the dragon scales glinting on his helmet and his cape flapping into Hiccup's face. Hiccup turned, suddenly met the bristled beard of his father standing over him. He seemed to have risen to his full height and was glaring at him like the stone pillars of Hooligan ancestors flanking the Great Hall.

"Well, you wanted me to make a speech." Hiccup smiled something that probably came off quite cheesy.

"Not _that_ one."

"Well, what did you want me to do?"

"Not insult everyone. Didn't you learn anything in diplomacy?"

"Hey, they were _both_ at fault."

His father put his hands up in frustration, looked down at Hiccup to

give another word of advice when suddenly the sound of a sword slicing sharply into its sheath clipped through the air. Hiccup turned, saw Heather standing to the side of them, her hand on the hilt of her sword. She was looking at Hiccup pointedly. "Nice work," she said and let go of the handle, let the sword swing down. She glanced at Brandr, who was still fuming on the side, and shook her head. She stood up tall suddenly, the bear's cape smoothing out behind her. "Skirra VÃ©l," she called and her voice took on a ring of authority and maturity. She waited for the Hall to quiet, let the last clink of mugs still into the air. She then looked at Stoick. "We accept your generous gift," she said simply, and she looked at each of her council members, as if reading into them something of her thoughts, something of the tension in the air, and in her intent to relieve it. Slowly, the Skirra VÃ©l began to cheer, and sprinkles of applause started rising from both sides of the Hall until the edifice hummed with the rush of clapping hands and strong shouting Viking voices.

"She's a real peacemaker, son." His Dad's voice surprised him. Hiccup glanced up to see if he had really mouthed the words.

"The Skirra VÃ©l- _peacemakers?_" he whispered hoarsely. "Yeah, enslaving other tribes and killing dragons for sport really nicely fits into that definition."

But his father was looking at something - or, _someone_ - in the Hall someplace, wasn't listening. At least, not really getting what he was saying. "Son," he said, "they're making peace now. It's not always the outside that counts. You could learn something from her. You shouldâ€¦" he struggled to find the right word. "Be a little more, uh, open-minded!" His father put out his hand for emphasis.

Hiccup gasped. Dad didn't have to lecture me in _that_ department.

His father started moving off, talking now. Probably to Heather. He stepped back, looked at the scene and just shook his head. Heather's voice came back, the voices of her tribespeople responding.

What did Dad _really_ think of Heather and his brother's tribe?

They were saying something about choosing a dragon to befriend, to ride, Tuffnut and Snotlout offering their own dragons to the council members for practice. "Better to teach them on tame dragons already, from experts like us!" Snotlout was gleefully stating. Much more personal that way, someone was saying. Astrid's quieter voice was there, muffled, as well as Fishlegs and Ruffnut. Apparently every able-bodied Hooligan was volunteering his dragon for personal training practice to the Skirra VÃ©lite council members. It wasn't enough to give ten gift dragons. Now everyone's dragon was getting in on the act of diplomacy. There was a spark of irritation in him for some reason, and he shook his head at himself. Him of all people should be happy about that. Was it so bad to show the Skirra VÃ©lites such warmth and friendliness? That's what he was supposed to be good at. The peacemaker. Joining dragon and Viking. But maybe with people it was different. He looked up at his father, talking happily to Heather and pointing at the dragons pleasantly. Or maybe he was letting a conflict cloud his perspective on everything?

"Hiccup." It was a gentle voice. He lifted his head suddenly.

"Astrid," he said. He tried to put on a smile, but quickly wiped it off when he saw her furrowed brows and pursed frown. Was it the accusing monologue? "Astrid, I'm really sorry, I-"

"Forget it," she said curtly. "That's not why I'm here. You've got something else on your plate tonight, and tomorrow, and who knows how long-" She flung her arms up.

"What _are_ you talking about?"

"Heather's picked Toothless."

"Ahhh, for what?" he refocused on the unexpected topic she threw at him. She stared sharply at him, and his mind and then mouth started saying, "Oh, wait a minuteâ€¦"

She edged close to him, muttering low. "Somebody got the crazy idea to 'share' our dragons and expertise with these people until they get on their feet dealing with their own dragons - and everybody's been offering their own dragon like there's some kind of game going on. The point is, Heather wants Toothless."

"But Toothless and Heather don't like each other." Hiccup couldn't understand it. "That scene already played out."

"Ugh! I know." She jerked her back backward before leaning forward and putting her arm out pointedly. "I even volunteered Stormfly for her, but she insisted Stormfly and her buddy axe-wielder should get together and 'learn to understand each other.'" She put the words in quotes with her fingers. "So now I'm stuck riding with an axe maniac who Stormfly hates and youâ€¦" She stopped abruptly, looked at Hiccup, and sighed. He read something odd and distinct in her eyes, but what exactlyâ€¦ She sensed his noticing something amiss and she turned away quickly, mumbling something under her breath. "Astrid?" Hiccup prodded, stepped up to her and put a hand on her arm.

She glanced at him, was about to say something then stopped. She looked away then back at him with a hard conviction this time. "Be honest. Do you _like_ Heather?"

He jerked his head back suddenly. "What a question!"

"Come on, I've been watching you and that girl. I saw the way you looked at her."

"Astrid? How can you insinuate-"

"I'm not insinuating anything! I just know what I saw. And I know the way your Dad's been trying to get you two together."

"Huh? What Dad does has nothing to do with me. Astrid, I'm not looking at anyone. You're my girl, remember? The green-eyed, red-haired kids?" He grinned sheepishly at her and she smirked, raised her arm and was about to smack him when a black figure stepped in front of them suddenly. Hiccup turned, saw Heather there. "Well?" She eyed Hiccup with that look again. "Show me your dragon."

Hiccup felt Astrid tense suddenly and Hiccup stepped forward, squeezed her arm reassuringly and smiled at Heather. "Sure, let's just keep it short, okay?" He looked back at Astrid and winked,

walked over to Heather and passed her. "I might want to hit the sack kind of early today."

Heather caught up with him and Hiccup looked over at her, the obsidian black hair, the soft round face and bright wide eyes. Those eyes that, while her lips were joyful, they reflected something almost sorrowful. They reached Toothless and the dragon hissed when he saw the girl in black. "Heather, are you sure you want to learn on Toothless? I mean, the two of you didn't exactly start on good terms."

Toothless grumbled a particularly loud affirmative, and Heather looked at him from the corner of her eye, took a deep breath. "I like a challenge," she said and looked at Hiccup, firming her gaze. Hiccup felt the color run to his cheeks again. There was something scary in the way she looked at him, with those dark brown eyes and the thin eyebrows that wavered down over the lids of her eyes. She stepped up to him softly all of a sudden, flipped her hair back over her shoulders and glanced away. "I also want to know more about you." She looked at him.

He started back suddenly, just knew this was gonna happen. Ever since she looked at him at dinner that night - and then Astrid. Come on, this was too much. What would Astrid think now? Toothless hummed something up at him, and Hiccup knew the dragon probably was getting vibes of this mess he was trapped in. "Um." He cleared his throat. "You know, this is not going to workâ€¦ unfortunately." He gave a reassuring smile that turned a little goofy and uneven. "Only I can fly Toothless." He held out his prosthetic and gestured to the left stirrup of Toothless' rigging.

"Well, I might learn more riding with you." She put a hand on his suddenly, making Hiccup jump. He eyed Toothless desperately, and the dragon throatied one last protest.

His father suddenly came in the scene before Hiccup could come up with another excuse. "This is wonderful to see!" he boomed. "The two heirs training one another. You're going to have a fine time, Heather." He beamed and patted Hiccup on the back. Hiccup glanced up at his father, trying to communicate something like, do I have to? But of course he knew he was stuck.

"Do you have a plan, Hiccup, on the training?" his father asked.

Hiccup peered up at Heather. "I guess we'll discuss it in the morning."

"Or tonight," Heather said, a smile on her face. "Your father here has been so kind as to invite me to sleep at your house." She set those eyes, sharp and deep, on him again.

10. Chapter 9: Speed Unknown, Size Unknown

a/n: We couldn't think of anything to say in this author's note, so here, have a Night Fury! XD

View the illustration at the official webpage. Put a period where the dashes are: [howtotrainyourdragon2](#) - [thecomicseries](#) - com

>or at my deviantArt gallery: inhonoredglory - deviantart - gallery - 38855965<p>

* * *

><p>How to Train Your Dragon II
>The Dragon Whisperer

****Chapter 9****

****Speed Unknown, Size Unknown****

"Dad, Dad, you just can't do this to me. Come on, have a little sympathy for a guy, can't you?"

Hiccup had barely scrambled up to catch up with his father when Stoick shushed him with a big hand. "It's only for a couple nights, Hiccup."

"Well, any nights are going to be murder." He paced hurriedly beside his father, as they virtually raced down the stairs of the Great Hall on their way to the Haddock House. Hiccup glanced back, saw Heather and her Council thankfully delayed up at the top of the steps, Astrid and the rest of them unseen somewhere in the milling masses of tribesmen still talking into the night as the party came to a close. Hiccup turned back to his father, put out his hands desperately. "Dad, you know what's between Astrid and me. I can't just let some strange girl sleep at our house, especially Heather. I just don't feel comfortable with her. Like, at all."

Toothless suddenly bounded up alongside them, hummed a low growl at Stoick.

"Hiccup," his father said, heavily, "you're gonna have to let go of petty little reasons like that. It's got no place in a future chief's life."

"Dad-" He didn't like the sound of where this was going.

"I think Heather is a great example for you, and I'm delighted she suggested we take her in for the night. She wants to get to know you. Isn't that wonderful?"

Hiccup shook his head rigidly. "No, Dad, it is not." Hiccup looked back briefly as they crossed the grass and started for the stone path to their house. "I don't want to get to know her more. It's bad enough as it is. Astrid thinks-"

Stoick sighed exasperatedly. "What does Astrid think?"

"Dad, you know, she's getting ideas like, like I like Heather or somethingâ€|"

"Well, if she's so jealous why don't you two do something about it? When I was about your age, I'd already taken your mother for mine."

"Oh come on, Dad, we're different, I just don't feel-"

"Hiccup!" his father snapped suddenly, reaching the front step of the

house and bending down to look at Hiccup. He put out a hand, bobbing it pointedly in front of him. "Just pay attention to this Heather woman. You could learn a lot from her, and you and her could go a long, long ways towards reconciling and uniting our two tribes."

What? Hiccup crossed his brows and halted in front of his father, Toothless swirling around him, his black shape like a shadow in the night.

His father gestured him to come forward. "You don't think about those things, son, the way a chief can't just think about himself in matters like this. He's got to think of the good of the tribe, and its future."

"Aaandâ€¦" Hiccup leaned up closer to his father's bushy beard, "what does that exactly mean, for _me_?"

"It means, Hiccup, that maybe you should try seeing if you do enjoy Heather's company. You never know, our tribes might even get united by marriage." He opened the front door and stepped inside. Hiccup rolled on his heels suddenly, caught his balance on Toothless, who seemed to suddenly be right behind him. The dragon purred with concern and Hiccup stared at him, wide-eyed. He swallowed tightly. "Okay, Toothless, I think I just deciphered what Dad was trying to say." He'd heard of political weddings before, but Dad would _never_ pull one of those on him. Would he? Man, he hoped not. He looked out over the landscape, saw Heather wave goodbye to her Council, begin to make her way up the steps to the house. Things were definitely not looking so hot right now. He stepped forward into the house, clapping the door shut behind him. "Dad?" he started, then noticed Gobber and Mulch fumbling around near the stairs to his room, a huge wooden something stretched out between them.

"Just git over to the right, Mulch, over, _move!_" Gobber was screaming, and the wooden thing jolted, almost tripping them. Hiccup looked at the thing again, saw a headboard, a post, the flat wooden surface. "Oh noâ€¦" He found his father standing cross-armed, pleased by the fire, looking up at the wooden bed getting hauled up to Hiccup's loft.

"Let me guess, Dad. She's sleeping in my room."

"Well, of course. You don't expect me to have her down here." He let out an easy laugh.

"The day just keeps getting better doesn't it?" Hiccup sighed. "Listen, Dad, you can't just throw her in there with me. It's not- I mean, it's _my_ room." He stepped up to his father, tried to look authoritative in some way. "Doesn't that count for anything?"

"Yes, it means you should welcome her."

Hiccup rolled his eyes. His father started moving off towards the stairway, and Toothless jumped towards the door, hissing gently. That was it. Heather was close. Hiccup turned to his father, gave it one more shot. "Dad, I just don't feel comfortable with her. And it would be, would be, uh, wrong to _her_." Yeah, that was a good one. "So, please, she can have my room. I- I'll sleep outside with Toothless. It'll be fun!"

His father heaved another frustrated breath. "Hiccup, stop making this such a big deal. You have a responsibility."

"To _her_?"

"To _me_." Stoick took a deep breath, bent down suddenly and spoke much quieter. "This is a lot, well, _deeper_ than I think I've made you think." He cleared his throat hoarsely, leaned down and whispered. "I wronged Rune once."

"I thought it was the other way, uh, around?" Hiccup pursed his lips, wondered how his father would react knowing he knew. But apparently his father wasn't quite listening. His eyes had moved over to the front door, which was slowly creaking open and the girl walking in. "This might be my last chance to make it up to him," Stoick said in a quick breath and then stepped forward towards the slim figure. "Heather!" he said warmly.

Hiccup sighed, watched his father be quite hospitable to the Skirra VÃ©llite girl. There definitely was something more to the Story than he figured.

Hiccup cleared his throat carefully and stepped up the stairs to his room. Toothless swept up ahead of him, turned around by Hiccup's bed and swirled to face the door, his eyes narrowing and his snout curved into an insulted sniff. "Toothless," Hiccup put a hand out towards him. "Shh." He didn't want any _more_ conflict here. It was enough to have the strange girl in his room.

Of course, it's not like it was going to be another Torch incident. He chuckled at the memory. It's just that he hoped Toothless and the girl wouldn't keep him up all night. Toothless didn't look like he was ready either to just let this happen. The dragon was just a bit protective and while he really wished Toothless could do something to get this girl out of his room, Dad wanted him to be nice and he had to play along. Maybe it wasn't going to be that bad.

Hopefully.

So long as Astrid didn't find out and get crazy ideas in her head.

Heather followed the thin kid - no, she had to start using his name. _Hiccup_. She followed this Hiccup up to his room, a lovely loft of a place with the edge of the floor cut away to reveal the main part of the house down below. She was about to step up to the main floor of the loft when that black dragon he owned suddenly huffed to a halt in front of her. His bared teeth flashed white in the semi-darkness, and she gasped, lashed her sword out quickly.

"Stop!" the boy screeched and she halted, turned to him and saw his small silhouette against the backdrop of faint golden light. The dragon hissed at her and she kept her sword aloft, stared the wild beast in the eyes. She wasn't about to let this scrawny nothing tell her what to do. She was her own boss, her own-

She put the sword down suddenly. This wasn't home, she whispered under her breath. She had a mission here. She looked up at Hiccup, the look of worry in his eyes, and then at the black dragon, its

scales glinting in the candlelight around the room, heaving to every breath of that beast. She suddenly realized how beautiful this dragon was, how stupendous it was that it was standing here in front of her, semi-tamed, and that she could, if she wanted to, almost reach out and touch it. What a prize dragon it was.

It would be quite a prize when they subjugate Berk.

"When does he go outside?" she said finally, trying to keep to a minimum in her mind the fact that a killer of a creature was standing there in front of her, teeth bared. It was almost a help, in a way, to keep herself from thinking too much of the task at hand. She found it hard to think about the assassination without her nerves reacting somehow, especially now, so close to the time, and she couldn't afford that. The dragon distracted her, and she let it, stepping up into the room, skirting the dragon's snout and his fierce glare. The Night Fury growled at her, its green eyes hot and wild. She looked at Hiccup, but the kid was gazing down at his dragon, a mix of amusement and concern in his eyes.

"Umm," Hiccup stammered, "Toothless?" He walked up to the black beast and stroked its forehead, glanced up at her once. "Heather's just gonna be, uh, spending the night here," he told the black creature. "You understand that." The dragon sniffed, jolted his head sharply and eyed her through narrow glowing eyes. "Listen, Toothless, you got to understand that."

The dragon hissed, snapped his head at her. She smarted, wanted to whip out her sword again, but hesitated. The boy was trying desperately to soothe the creature. "Just put him outside." She stepped back, found her back against the short table by the little wooden bed. She whipped her sword around into its sheath.

Hiccup finally turned around to see her. The dragon slinked up to an incredibly wide, flat slab of rock in the opposite corner of the room.

"Are you getting rid of that thing?" she asked sharply, watching the black wings fold delicately around its body, the round smooth head snuggle into its feet, and the eyes, the eyes that kept staring at her.

"What thing?" Hiccup asked.

"That dragon." She eyed the beast hard, tried not to be afraid, looked, stared and burrowed, into its eyes.

"Toothless is not a thing," Hiccup's voice interrupted her stare and she sensed something convicted in it. She looked at him, found a pair of hard eyes looking at her.

She raised a brow and rose her frame slightly. "When will he leave?"

"He doesn't leave. He sleeps here with me."

She stepped back, saw the hiss in that dragon's eyes. "So you sleepâ€¦ with a dragon?"

"Exactly." There was that conviction again. She peered at him, at his

thin frame in the candlelight, the glint in his eyes from the golden light, the shadows sharply crossing his body.

She'd have to get that dragon out of here, somehow.

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Hiccup turned away from the girl, frustrated with the whole situation. Now she was scared of Toothless, and Toothless was mad at her. _Who_ exactly did Dad think was going to be sleeping tonight? He flopped himself on the bed, the wood smacking him. He peered up at her, the soft glow of the light playing off her gentle features and he suddenly felt incredibly uncomfortable. He jumped up and walked over to the slanted table on the other end of the room. He looked at the happy scattered mess of papers on the surface, the blueprints for that metal ship he'd been building, the never-ending stack of designs for Toothless' tail and rigging. He was still trying to find a way to consolidate the idea of metal and wing. The lightweight new metal was just too tempting to go unused in new and-

"What's this?"

He whirled. The girl, looking down at the parchments curiously, her finger lightly moving over a piece of the paper.

"Uh," Hiccup pushed the papers around. He cleared his throat.
"Designs."

She picked up the ship blueprint, peered closely at the cross-section of a strange new ship, laden with masts and sails, and with a tapered hull much thinner than their ordinary Viking ships. The bow, so much thinner, cutting into the waves sharply. She looked up at him from above the paper. "I didn't know you invent."

He shrugged. "It gets boring around here."

She was not amused and continued to rifle through the papers on his desk. "This is incredible," she said, quite taken by the hastily-sketched designs and brainstorm he had. She took another of Toothless' stirrup and peered at its intricate working, drawing her hand over the paper.

"I- I'm trying to design a new tail for him," he said, figuring he'd better make conversation, "with metal panels."

She put the papers down and got a thoughtful look in her eye. "You don't suppose I could _borrow_ these at some point. I really want to show my father." She leaned up to look at him, the angle sending her face into a shadow, an odd sharp shadow.

If Hiccup were superstitious, he might have taken it as an omen. As it was, he just smiled awkwardly and bobbed his head once. "Sure, why not?"

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Heather's bed had been placed to the left of Hiccup's in the back end of the room, next to the table with the blueprints. She took off her mantle carefully and unhooked the sword from her waist, laying them on the foot and posts of the bed. The kid was already in the blanket

of his bed, burying his head in a book, trying to look busy, but clearly distracted. She could read through that kind of expression any day.

"What book is that?" she asked.

"The Book of Dragons," he said, not looking at her.

"Oh, then I guess this dragon is in there." She looked over at the Night Fury - which was still gazing at her dangerously. She hissed back in her mind, willing the creature to sleep or maybe leave. She turned back to Hiccup. "Could I see that page?" She walked up to the side of his bed, stopped and looked down at him. He took his eyes off the book, seemed to cringe at her gaze. He flipped the book, stopped on one spot near the end of it. "Here." He handed the book up and Heather took it, observed the drawings and the detailed notes on its behavior.

>
Faster than any dragon._

Fire more powerful than any species.

Great maneuverability - keep yourself strapped in.

_Loyal, extremely loyal.

>

>She put the book down, looked over at the beast, the hot killer eyes still gazing at her. The plan was to kill the prize dragon, with the tribe defeated. A beautiful species it was. Such a shame toâ€¦ kill it. If they could just harness that powerâ€¦|<p>

But just the same, its head would look beautiful mounted on the walls of their Hall like so many other dragons. The Night Fury suddenly put his head up and hissed at her. She turned down to Hiccup, handed him the book. "How did you ever _tame_ this creature?"

His eyes perked suddenly, and he looked over at the dragon with a look she could only describe as love. Love. She looked back at the dragon, its eyes hot on her. Hate. She gazed down at the kid, as he happily described his meeting this Toothless creature, a whole horrid conflict with his tribe and keeping secrets, a rite of passage and a great huge dragon that eventually caused his physical handicap, but, more importantly, he said, the peace of the tribe and of Viking and dragon.

But this time, she had sat on the edge of the bed, and he was sitting up, legs bent upward, arms around them and head resting on his knees. He was totally lost to the world right now, consumed in this _fascinating_, she had to admit, story about him and his dragon. "So, is he stillâ€¦ very protective?" she asked cautiously, watching the burning eyes of the creature.

"Sure he is. I wouldn't still be here talking to you if it weren't for him."

Her brow perked. "So there's no chance he's going outside, then, is there?"

"Huh?"

She jolted back slightly, realized what a mistake she'd almost made.

She swung her legs up on his bed suddenly, to distract him, and put her chin in her knees. There was still a confused look on his face and she was getting sick of it very quickly. "Does he sleep?" she asked, getting desperate to get this charade over with.

He was still looking at her, now resting on the edge of his bed. "Uh," he stammered, "sure he sleeps. I justâ€¦ don't know about tonight. He seems kind ofâ€¦ nervous." He avoided her eyes and started to slip into the covers. "You want to sleep now?" he asked, muffled as he rubbed his nose.

She turned back to look at the dragon, and it suddenly stepped up from its rock bed and slid down onto the floorboards. She watched it carefully, seeing something of intent in its eyes, but not knowing what it was. The dragon hissed lightly and walked up to her. She edged further into the bed. What was the thing trying to do? The dragon growled, brought his snout up behind her. She slid closer to Hiccup and the kid leaned up out of the covers suddenly. The dragon made another move and she pushed herself up against him. "Hey," Hiccup squeaked and flipped himself off the bed, getting to his feet quickly. The dragon nodded once and hummed threateningly to her.

"Toothless, what are you trying to do?" Hiccup moved around the bed, was kneeling by the dragon now. The dragon purred at him, lashed a hard eye on her and hissed. "Toothless, you got to calm down." He looked at her. "I- I'm sorry he frightened you."

She stood up, not wanting to admit what really was quite true. "Will he ever go to sleep?" She stared down at the dragon. "He needs to go to sleep."

Hiccup got to his feet, led the creature over to its slab of a bed and spoke to it in hushed and gentle tones. She stepped over to her own bed, sat down on it with hot curses in her head. She looked over at the case of her sword hanging patiently on the bed post. The boy was still talking to the dragon. She slipped the sword out, the thin voice of metal slicing metal, and lay the curved implement on her lap. She pressed her palm around its hilt. The boy sounded like he was coming to bed now. She moved the sword over quickly, under her pillow. The moment that dragon was asleepâ€¦

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Hiccup stared up at the roof, at the angle of the blue moonlight on the ceiling. He calculated it might have been around three hours now, ever since they made a sort of truce and him and the Heather person settled down to sleep. He looked over at Toothless again, saw that he still hadn't slept. Go to sleep, Toothless, at least someone should rest tonight. He turned over to his right side, peeked through one eye at Heather. Both his eyes popped open suddenly to find her staring pointedly at him, the thin spark in her eye muddled by the shadows.

"Hi," he said, very small, and brought his hand out to do some little wave.

She smirked and rolled over on her other side. He whispered a mumble that didn't quite make sense to him, just something to express his frustration. He waited another hour, and looked at Toothless again.

The dragon was still breathing heavily. Hiccup turned to look at Heather. Her body was heaving gently in a regular pattern. Perhaps she was asleep?

He slipped out of the covers carefully, let his feet, slowly, _slowly_ onto the ground. Toothless perked his head suddenly and Hiccup brought a finger to his lips. Toothless nudged his head up, his eyes alive in the night, and slid silently off the rock slab. Hiccup pressed his boot gently on the floorboards, tried to keep his metal prosthetic from making too much of a smack against the wood. Toothless nudged up against him, his eyes wide and pleased. He started to hum contentedly. "Shh, bud," Hiccup whispered, putting a hand to the dragon's mouth. Toothless blinked and slinked lower, jumping on ahead of him down the narrow flight of stairs, his wings and tail lifting tentatively to avoid any loud obstacles. Hiccup followed after him, and stepped on ahead of him to open the door. Toothless leaped out quickly into the night. Hiccup looked back briefly, at the far end of the house, at the dark shadow that was snoring away happily. This whole Heather mess certainly had him distracted from Induction preparation, didn't it? "Hm," Hiccup hummed, got an idea in his head. He closed the door gently and caught up with Toothless, who was sitting on his haunches on the stone steps, waiting for him. "Want to hitch a ride on your namesake, Toothless?" He patted the dragon gently, and Toothless hummed and nudged his head into Hiccup's chest. "Let's go. I could use the practice."

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Heather felt the dragon - and the boy - leave the room. She turned over when she felt the soft patter of steps descend the flight of stairs. So much for tonight, she hissed, slipped out of the bed and patted to the stairs, watched the boy and dragon step out of the house and close the door behind them. She went back, grabbed her sword and mantle and slipped down the stairs.

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"Man to port! Double the speed, get a move on, people, we need this ship to _move_, I said _move_. Get those paddles running, open the sails, let this water run wild in our wake. Let-"

Hiccup stopped shouting suddenly, slumped down on the deck of his metal ship, _The Night Fury_. He'd been screaming his head off for the past half-hour, to the empty rowing benches in front of him and the vacant deck populated only by an insomniac seagull and stray puddles of ocean.

"Toothless, do you think I'm doing any better?" He glanced up at the dragon, who was balancing precariously on the third mast's horizontal beam. "You know you should have just stayed on the shore, instead of fighting it up there?" Toothless, barely visible against the still-dark sky, squealed an objection and continued fighting his balance on the mast, his tail wrapped and wound tightly around the vertical pole for more leverage. Hiccup stroked the black tailfin beside him.

"Thank goodness you aren't frightened by _my_ ship. Is it because it's so different from the drakkars?" Toothless hummed, caught his balance again and opened his wings out to the early morning breezes,

squawking deeply. The ship heaved forward, catching the wind, and Hiccup put a foot out to keep from falling. "No, I think because you were there helping me build it from the ground up." He smiled, looked out over the ocean.

They were already quite a distance from Berk, the island now only a black silhouette to their left, made blacker by the very faint, almost indiscernible light increasing along the margin of the horizon to their right. Gentle black water lapped around the boat and into infinity on either side. It was still late summer, but the nip of autumn already teased its way up Hiccup's ears and fingertips and crawled through his coat into his chest and up his arms. He shivered, looked at Toothless still finding his place on the mast.

"Thanks for coming along, buddy. I couldn't stand another minute in that room."

Toothless hummed approvingly, looked fondly down at him. Hiccup patted Toothless' tail, then faced the empty benches again.

"Back to business," Hiccup sighed, half-heartedly, and bent down to grab the heavy sword lying on the deck. He mustered it up vertically, both hands gripping it, and started yelling at the top of his lungs across the water. The echoes swept clear across the waves, and he cringed. "This is such a stupid way to wage a war." He dropped the sword and waved his arm towards Toothless. "I mean, come on, the enemy will hear you clear to Valhalla. Shouldn't we try stealth for a change?" He sighed, looked at Toothless. "Not that I'm interested in starting any wars anytime soon anyway." He flopped on the deck, leaned his back against the mast. Toothless cocked his head, peered down at him in amusement.

"Okay, so now you're entertained." Hiccup feigned hurt, stuck his nose up at the gummy grin of the dragon. "Well I for one have to endure this humiliation tomorrow morning for this Induction nonsense in front of my entire tribe plus a whole other tribe and chief who just happened to show up in time. I'm gonna be leading Dad's Council on a ship screaming this stupid war cry, so you better stop laughing!"

But the dragon went right on grinning and gurgling noises at him, his eyes perking alive with play. The light around was beginning to rise and a peachy glow came over the amused creature. Hiccup smirked, started laughing. Toothless nudged his head forward, gurgled a smile at him again. Something ridiculous and happy played inside Hiccup all of a sudden and he laughed a pure, delighted carefree laugh, the dragon humming and gurgling and flapping his tail from side to side. Toothless gave him a grin and he wiped his eyes on his sleeve, still smiling uncontrollably. "Toothless, what am I gonna do?" he said, a laugh escaping him again. "I'm gonna burst out laughing tomorrow and that will really be great in front of Dad. I can see it now." He waved his hand, pumped his chest and lowered his voice. "Son, you're just what this Council needed. I'm so proud of you."

He laughed again, shook his head and brought a hand over his face, smiling in that hurt way that happens when you're too happy.

His hand stopped over his face suddenly. He slipped his palm down quickly and leaned back against the mast. "Why is it always like this, eh, Toothless? Why do I suck at just what he wants me to be

good at? To be great at? Best at? When you're part of the War Council, Toothless, you can't just be average - you're supposed to be the best." He looked up at Toothless, found a puzzled expression.

"I wish I could just be average."

Toothless hummed, purred softly. Hiccup glanced up, saw the dragon lifting his wings in the breeze and nudging his tail towards him. The red prosthetic tail. Hiccup looked at it, smiled.

"Thanks bud. You think very highly of me." He grinned up at him. "I suppose if I could befriend you, nearly anything's possible." Toothless yapped at him excitedly, rocking the boat.

"Whoa, now you keep still. I don't want to overturn this thing, and you wouldn't want your namesake at the bottom of the sea, right?" Toothless hummed quieter, finally settled his position on the mast to watch him.

Hiccup again lifted the unwieldy sword, opened a book lying on the deck and started reading commands and orders from it as he brandished the weapon. He bellowed and motioned towards the empty seats in front of him, imagining for a moment his father's Council there, watching him and hopefully heeding his numbing screams. Maybe Spitelout or Phlegma. They were the top ones in the Council, the toughest, most daring and bold, the quickest and fiercest. The ones he was supposed to lead tomorrow.

Training a deadly, man-eating dragon seemed a lot easier right now.

At least, that's what he told Astrid when she tried to give him pointers on how to deal with her mother, Phlegma, Phlegma the Fierce. That said it all. Ferocity and perfection, those two were hard to live up to. Now he knew how Astrid became, well, Astrid.

Not to mention Snotlout, who was happily trying to sell him his knowledge about his father Spitelout's tricks and preferences, though he could already guess what they were. Be tough. Show no mercy. Hiccup wrinkled his nose. Yeah, he'll show me no mercy tomorrow morning, that's for sure.

He sighed, bent down and read another of the string of phrases in the page-eaten book Gobber had given him. It had originally been his Dad's, the same one he had studied for his own Induction Day. Hiccup squinted down at the phrase at hand, ready to bellow it out, but it wasn't a command or an order this time. He looked closer, read it aloud.

"A chief and commander puts the good of his tribe first and foremost. To give great sacrifices, to give up what he treasures more than anything, may be the key to his victory. He must always do what is necessary."

Hiccup rose up from the page. "So this book is handing me advice too." He turned to Toothless. "What's that supposed to mean, do what is necessary? These books are awfully vague!" His voice trailed off suddenly, as he realized the presence of an unreal flickering glow around the ship and then the faint growl of creatures and the lilting

splash of water, of movement, in the sea. He jolted up. The glow was rising out of the water, from underneath the waves everywhere in every direction. Beautiful, shimmering, wavering, yellow and white and green glowing dots like constellations crowding up from the depths of the sea, flickering, undulating auroras in the sea. A creature splashed out of the water, its long reptilian snout gurgling in the waves. It descended into the lights, glowing itself, growling and adding to the song that hummed from the waves.

Water dragons. Hundreds, thousands, of them, stretching as far as the eye could see. He dropped the sword, jumped forward and grabbed the metal right side of the ship. Hiccup let out a low whistle. Toothless was yelping above and behind him, and the little ship leaned starboard as the dragon leaned forward towards the vision.

The water dragons were beginning to crowd around the ship, lapping up to it curiously and sending the glow of their golden green eyes flashing over the metal. Their numbers were stupendous; they must have intersected the migratory path of these creatures. The boat was pretty far out to sea. It made sense. He'd never seen such large numbers of water dragons, perhaps because they migrated at night, in the early hours like now, rather than in the day. In fact, until the other night during the storm and today, he had barely saw a dozen at a time of these dragons at all. And today, he was much closer to them than ever before.

His eye caught graceful, flying motions ahead of him. He squinted in the darkness, kept his eye on the unearthly motion of the glowing orbs leaping through the air in front of him. He could make out thin wings, sharp wings, cutting through the air for a few seconds and then sailing back into the black waters, then back sailing again in the air. These dragons seemed to leap from crest to crest, never able to truly fly but only skim the water. _Flyfish._

He glanced down, his gaze riveted suddenly on a quieter species swimming deftly besides the boat. He started back, stared closer. Some were totally blanketed in barnacles, but under the debris, the real creature awed him. Their wings were totally transparent, their bodies, milky translucent. He could see multitudes of these dragons through each other until the darkness engulfed them in the dark beyond. Their whitish organs were visible even from his vantage point. He could make out several glowing parts, the glow apparently ebbing with the dragon's mood. One large long organ lining the bottoms of their bellies was jet black, and he noticed black fluid oozing out of their mouths from between their teeth and staining the waters all around the ship and behind their paths of travel. _Wonder what that liquid does for them,_ he mused, made mental note again.

A smaller school of dragons curved themselves around an adult version of their kind, the little dragons spry and happy and yapping in that unique way of offspring to their parents. The two species were beginning to crowd the ship, little baby dragons eyeing him widely and yapping back at their mothers, staring at him curiously. "Hey fellas," he said, leaning over and putting a hand out cautiously to them, "what are you staring at?" They eyed him even more fixedly, some of them glowing brighter as they swam closer. The singing in the sea changed pitch suddenly and grew more lyrical. He hummed the faint melody back, and the dragons by the ship started yelping and yammering sounds to him. He smiled. "Aaah, well, I'm not sure what

I'm saying, so forgive any misunderstandings, all right?" He chuckled and hummed some more, kept talking and humming as the dragons continued singing, humming, and playing in the water next to the ship.

A blast rocked the boat suddenly. "Whoa!" Hiccup screeched as his back hit the deck. A column of water shot out to the right like a geyser raining down on the ship. Hiccup could faintly hear Toothless yelp as cold, raw water slapped Hiccup in the face and soaked into him, prompting a chilled gasp from him. He wiped his eyes and inhaled the air sharply again, his eyes locked at the emerging figure before him.

The Great Dragon.

A vast island of a head rose and towered out from the receding crash of water. A knobby, barnacled head teeming with glowing tendrils, filaments with shimmering orbs, like many layers of seaweed covering his body like shiny hair. The water-soaked mane of glowing tendrils sweeping over its great eye of a burning sun, taller than trees, sliced through with a black pupil in the center. A great eye.

Hiccup stumbled up, heard Toothless above him, screeching, humming even more excitedly than the first time he met the Great Dragon. He looked up at Toothless, saw the dragon leaning forward in the ship, looking into the great eye of the huge dragon, yapping, yapping like the little baby dragons to their parents. Hiccup leaned back, listened to this foreign sound come out of Toothless, this unmistakable sound that he remembered last Snoggletog, when a hundred baby dragons dug the sound into his head and kept the whole village awake into the night, yapping at their mothers and fathers.

And now Toothlessâ€¦ He looked at the Great Dragon, humming at Toothless, the great buzz in his throat sending vibrations over the water and shivering the boat from side to side. Toothless yapped again, shook his head playfully at the huge water creature.

His naturalism couldn't be wrong. But if it wasn't, then that would mean the Great Dragon was somehow Toothless' parent? Something wasn't right with the picture. Unlessâ€¦ Maybe Toothless lost his parents? And this Great Dragonâ€¦?

He had to think about this a while. He suddenly realized how little he actually knew of his friend's past.

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Toothless hummed excitedly at Ormarr and the Great Dragon throated a greeting laden with a poignant happiness.

The migration, Toothless hummed largely from his delicate post on the mast, _where is it going?_

The Great Dragon eyed Toothless' pose questioningly and sent curious, yellow light basking over the Night Fury. _Sure that's a good place you have there, uh, Toothless?_

Sure it is, Toothless growled, slipping again and catching his place. _Trust me._

Ormarr throated a chuckle, and Toothless yelped at him, suddenly found himself in the old days, when Ormarr helped him recover from his father's death that time long ago. The little arguments they had and the fun they shared. Toothless suddenly noticed miniature versions of the sea dragon swimming besides his vast body, their trunk-like tails slapping the water and sending screaming pockets of water flying airborne and spraying Toothless.

So you brought the family. He hummed an exhilarated hum to Ormarr, then yelped to Hiccup to get his attention. Toothless almost laughed at himself for trying; Hiccup was already engrossed in leaning over the edge and watching the young sea dragons frolicking besides their parent, each one in itself the length of a Viking ship.

But the great dragon rumbled more heavily as he heaved besides the boat, like a massive ship scraping abreast a tiny one. His big eye engulfed _The Night Fury_ in yellowing light so intense that Toothless had to turn his head away. Ormarr grumbled low. _The truth is_, he hummed, seriously this time, _I'm leaving this area. I have to go back to the island. Skari followed me here - to find you._

Me?

He's not forgotten the feud. He actually asked me just yesterday how he could find you.

Toothless shot his ear flaps up and swiveled back to face the yellow eye, a growl muttering low from deep in his throat. _Tell him to get lost._

The Great Dragon rumbled. _Already tried that._ The burning eye flickered faster. Skrills aren't the most persuadable type - especially Skari. _And after the load of insults you both exchanged two nights ago. If I hadn't butted in_

I know. Toothless sniffed, growled at him. _I couldn't help it, I was so mad. _Toothless wrinkled his nose, saw Hiccup staring at him weirdly, stepping away from the vision on the edge of the ship and stepping up to the mast and putting a hand on Toothless' tail, stroking the fin that drooped down to the deck. Toothless could see that Hiccup had sensed something up, something wrong, between him and the Great Dragon, and the boy's words confirmed it. "Toothless, what's the matter?"

Toothless hummed, tried to be reassuring, shifted his eyes away from the boy, concentrated back to the great dragon. _So I wasn't on my best behavior. I know, trying to have one out with Skari would not do us any good. Putting Hiccup's life in danger like thatâ€¦_

Ormarr's slitted pupil glanced down at the boy, back to Toothless. _Not to mention your own life._

Toothless fluttered his wings in exasperation and shifted his footing on the horizontal beam. He didn't care that the boat rocked right now. _Why would Skari still want to kill me after all this time? I hid in that volcano for sixty odd summers to get away from Skari and his ilk - I thought he'd have died or something by nowâ€¦_ _He grumbled, hissing.

Ormarr hummed. _Well, that's another little thing he told me. Apparently when you disappeared from the island, he even flew across the Great Sea to the Cold Lands to find you._ The great dragon paused for a moment and settled deeper in the waters as Toothless's eyes opened wider at him.

The Cold Lands. Toothless looked out over the water, opposite the rising sun, where the horizon was still dark and cold. It'd been so long since he was there, that old place he used to call home, beyond Berk, beyond the whole archipelago, beyond the Great Sea, where his mother had died in the snows and the unending freeze.

He shivered.

Are there still Night Furies there? Toothless hummed to the great dragon. He could feel Hiccup's hand on his tail, a gentle, tense little hand that quivered as the great dragon hummed largely alongside the boat.

Ormarr gathered his breath again, growled and hummed, his eye strong on Toothless and yellow. _According to Skari, yes. He swore you all should return and die there, like he almost did. Oh yes - the ice is still thickening deeper and deeper in the winters like you told me. It's even worse now. White land all around where water should be. Skari couldn't even blast through the ice when he got himself trapped there looking for you. Only the sleep saved him all those years ago - and he slept a bit too long in his opinion. Forty, fifty winters, he's not sure anymore. The thing is, he blames you for all his miserable life's ills and now he's out to return the favor on you and your family._ The Great Dragon huffed, growled something sharp and frustrated.

Toothless slapped his tail against the mast. Of all the idiotic ideas. It's not like only Skari's parents died - his did as well. So what was he thinking to get revenge on? He slapped his tail against the mast, suddenly heard Hiccup yelp. Toothless glanced down, moaned to see that he'd slapped Hiccup unintentionally. He leaped down and fell in front of the boy, who was rubbing his cheek. He moaned and licked the spot, nuzzling his hair.

"That's okay, buddy," he said, petting him, then looking up at Ormarr. Toothless could see Hiccup's nerves unfurl as his small green human eyes stared up at the Great Dragon. "What's with it with you two?" Hiccup whispered, and Toothless hummed something frustrated and short, wishing he could explain something, _anything_ about what was going on. Hiccup's eyes shot wider suddenly and he leaned on Toothless. The water was rolling widely, and Toothless looked out, saw that Ormarr was now lumbering on ahead of the boat, the fleet of water dragons schooling around him and traveling on ahead. Suddenly something entered Toothless' mind, _on you and your family._ What family? Toothless jumped to the side of the ship, leaned out, roared. _Ormarr! You told him I had no family, didn't you?_

The Great Dragon paused, swirled the water in great waves as he turned to face Toothless again. _Well, it might have come out, I don't know. Why?_

Toothless inhaled, huffed a breath. _I just hope he's not thinking of taking this out on-_ Toothless looked back, at the puzzled face

behind him, the red hair still wet from salty sea water and the eyes still locked to the huge creature before them.

Ormarr growled, the vibrations in his voice deep and heavy. _He did mention something about a rider._

Toothless leaned back. So Skari _did_ take note of Hiccup when they met in the storm two nights ago. And him and his ridiculous idea of revenge— Why? Did he have no more things to kill? He had to take it out on people, too? For no reason at all! What kind of a maniac was that. What kind-

Ormarr was suddenly closer again, the blinding yellow light in his eye glaring down at him and on the tilting little boat. _You have bigger things to worry about than, than-_ The eyes turned greener suddenly.

Toothless followed his huge gaze, found the light directed on the scrawny Viking huddling on the deck of the ship, back against the mast, shielding his eyes desperately from the intense and suddenly tangibly warm green glare.

What? Toothless bristled, unnerved that Ormarr could even conceive of belittling Hiccup.

The Skrills have already killed off enough of your species in the feud. Don't you remember your father? The light in his eye burned with green fire. _I don't want to hear you screaming in the Spiral like he did. I won't be around to help you next time. You have to stop Skari or he'll be the end of you._

Ormarr heaved a roar, sent his offspring diving under the waves, his great tail hitting hard against the water and sending the boat surging upward upon a vast wave. Hiccup let out a yelp and Toothless swung back to steady him. Ormarr's low grumble reverberated from below the surface as the glow from his eye died under the waves. _I don't know how long it'll be til Skari figures out you're on Berk. Take my advice and leave that place. Go back to the Cold Lands. You can find a warmer place in the South, I've heard._ The swoosh of water swirled him in, as the morning light picked its way across the edge of the waves. _Just go somewhere Skari won't find you._

Toothless growled, hissed. _I can't just leave Berk. I can only fly with Hiccup for one thing-_

Then take him along.

_And that's the other thing. I belong here, with him, on Berk. I'm not running away.

>

>Ormarr's form could barely be seen now, as the once-happy glow of thousands of water dragons swirled around into oblivion down in the depth of the sea.<p>

Just don't let him get in your way, Dagr. Skari is smart; he'll use that boy against you.

Toothless stared at Ormarr's vanishing form, growled hotly and hissed. The last rumble faded under the waters; the shimmering specks

lining the great body fading as the immense island sank under the sea. Toothless craned his head down, tried seeing the shape growing darker below the vortex of water that sucked the boat into a swirl.

The name's Toothless, he spat, but he knew the great dragon was too far to hear.

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Even she, in her travels so far and wide across the archipelago and into that continent to the south, even she in all this hadn't seen the wonder that was this sight before her. The glowing vision of water dragons, those lights under the sea. Heather paused in her rowing, let herself be awed for a minute, and let herself go speechless as the one great dragon lumbered and lilted above the water, like a rolling island on the surface of the waves. The vision passed as the school of lights disappeared to the north. She sighed, refreshed to see the loveliness, the great power and beauty, of those creatures.

She took up the oars again, pushed on towards the north. She was sure she'd seen them go in this direction, but that ship of Hiccup's, it moved fast. The sails, so many of them, propelled the thing at a stunning speed even without a host of rowers manning the oars. It was incredible, she had to admit, and she repeated to herself to take those blueprints. Somehow she felt they would come extremely handy in the coming war.

She'd been thinking and thinking hard on how to accomplish her mission with the added complexity of this ever-present dragon. She could read people, and if this dragon was anything like that, she could tell that this beast was not going to leave Hiccup alone. The book did say "loyalty" was one of its better traits. She had to think about this in a different way.

In the early morning blackness, in the growing blushes of light, rowing across the water to find Hiccup's ship, the lap of water against her oar, she figured it out.

She spotted his ship finally, and she stopped rowing, let her little boat ease onwards gently. The silhouettes were clear, and sure enough, the dragon was there, jumping now onto the furled mast and Hiccup, looking up at him, his hands out in a sort of questioning gesture and the dragon, pacing the horizontal beam and rocking the little ship from side to side. She removed her mantle and lay it on the floor of the boat. She unhooked her sword and carefully placed it on top of the mantle. She stood up and tied her hair behind her, put her hands together and inhaled, jumped into the sea.

The water shot her through with a thrill of coldness. She crossed the hundred yards in a short time, pleased at her rate. Dad would have been proud. He'd held the record at Berk for swimming, he'd told her once, back when he was still part of the tribe.

She gave herself one more burst of speed, saw the hull of the metal ship up ahead, lunged upward and burst out of the water with a relieved gasp. She grabbed the edge of the ship.

"Heather-"

She blinked and swept her hair behind her. It was time to put her game face on. She looked up at the kid, Hiccup, gaping down at her, no doubt taken off guard. The dragon jumped down from the mast and leaned over the edge of the ship. She wiped the stray wet strands away from her face.

"Heather, what are you, uh, doingâ€|?"

"Swimming, you mean?" she answered coolly, floating her legs over near the top of the water. "I figured I'd better catch you and get started on those flying lessons." Her nerves started sparking again, and she bit her lip, turned and looked up at the dragon, who was leaning over, staring at her with an iciness again. _That_ was also getting old.

"You want me to help you up?" Hiccup spoke again, his voice clear in the early morning stillness, with only the lap of her waves against the hull. She didn't answer, inhaled and put a hand up to the black dragon. "I want to be his friend," she said, and kept that hand in motion towards the dragon's snout.

The dragon opened his eyes wide and pulled away, hissing, rocking the boat in the opposite direction and lifting her up the side of the ship.

"Hey, Toothless, it's all right," the boy soothed, and Heather curled over the side of the ship, landed on the deck. He came over to her, offered a hand. She took it, and he pulled her up. "Sorry about that," he said, glancing at Toothless. "Butâ€| you've decided to be friends with him?" Hiccup turned around and smiled at Toothless. "Hey, buddy, she wants to be friends. That's a good thing, right, buddy?"

Toothless hissed, still didn't seem to be buying the idea. Don't worry, she told herself, this is the Dragon Whisperer. He'll make that dragon like her, and then he'll be comfortable enough to leave Hiccup and her alone.

11. Week Delay!

****Author's Note****

For those of you looking for the latest chapter in my webnovel "How to Train Your Dragon II: The Dragon Whisperer," I want to give a short apology. The truth is, I was working every breathing moment on finishing the latest chapter and its illustration. I didn't make it, and the chapter is still quite a monster (over 14,000 words). My sister and I just need a moment to think about this chapter, maybe break it down, do some editing and what not. I value quality of storytelling over a timely post, so please forgive me. I want to give you the best story I can.

Please pardon the delay. We will be posting the next chapter the following Monday, and future updates will keep to the weekly schedule as much as we can. To hold you over, here's a preview of what's to come. Thank you for understanding.

* * *

><p>Hiccup was wary and he tensed suddenly, didn't like the feel of Heather's arms around him. Dragon Island was coming up now, they were out that far, and he got the idea of flying over, getting off. He could make some excuse about showing off the mines or something, anything to get her away from him. He directed Toothless lower and they skirted the water, the dive making her arms stiffer, her fingers lacing around each other, pressing closer into him. "I'm going to show you the mine we got," he said, over the rush of the sudden wind that swirled around Helheim's Gate. "You can see the metal." She didn't respond, only hugged him closer and brought her legs nearer his, near the stirrup, the one boot of hers nudging his right foot and the other shifting up and down gently by his prosthetic. He turned his head and saw her eyes consumed with thinking, looking at his feet and at the stirrups, mumbling something to herself that he could not hear. Her body shifted closer to his and her arms released him suddenly, moved down to where his hands were, on the handles of metal near the top of the saddle. She got a satisfied look on her face which frightened Hiccup and he leaned forward, pushing her arms out from the stirrup holds. He didn't like this feeling he was getting. "Toothless?" he whispered, and the dragon eyed him with concern. "To Dragon Island, okay, buddy?"

12. Chapter 10: A Score Settled

a/n: This was insane! After two weeks, we finally give you one hulkin' mega chapter. XD Which happens to be the end of Act I of our webnovel. So, expect climactic activity! One Act down, three more to go. Hope you enjoy this one.

As a special note

I want to mention that in this chapter takes place the event which spawned the genesis of this story in the first place. On June 8, 2012, I drew a picture (featured in the official website's "Extras" page) which inspired my sister and I to explain it. The novel went through many incarnations to get here, and in fact the specifics of this chapter came to us only this Friday (October 5, 2012). So my sister and I wrote nearly the whole chapter in four days! I'd like to thank my sister for helping me so much.

View the illustration at the official webpage. Put a period where the dashes are: [howtotrainyourdragon2 - thecomicseries - com](http://howtotrainyourdragon2-thecomicseries-com)
>or at my deviantArt gallery: [inhonoredglory - deviantart - gallery - 38855965](http://inhonoredglory-deviantart-gallery-38855965)<p>

* * *

><p>How to Train Your Dragon II
>The Dragon Whisperer

****Chapter 10****

****A Score Settled, Part 1****

"Aah!"

Astrid snapped up out of bed, hot and sweaty. "Thunders!" she spat, slapped a palm on her forehead. "Thundersâ€¦" she said, quieter,

tried to calm herself. Her heart was sparking horridly, and all because of a stupid dream? She looked at her hand, found it shaking slightly.

Of course Hiccup wasn't going to die.

She stared at the window determinedly. It seemed so real. She could almost smell the blood, feel the dark, dank air, hear some voice, someone screaming. But she couldn't see him.

She heaved a breath again, cursing her head for imagining such morbid things, flopping on her pillow, eyes wide open.

She had to get to him. Last night was weird. Heather wanted to fly with Toothless, that was not something to be excited about. And not to forget Stoick, the mystery with his brother and all. Hiccup had to have asked him about some of that last night.

She slid out of the bed, looked at her face in the chipped reflective surface of the glazed pot on her bedstand. She didn't look so bad, even early in the morning. She smiled, latched on her shoulder epaulets and smoothed out the wrinkles in her braid. Her hand paused as she adjusted her headband.

She didn't believe in dreams anywayâ€¦

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"What if you took me flying now?"

Hiccup whirled. His hands were busy on the tiller of his little ship, The Night Fury. That was the thing about multi-sailed ships. There were one too many ropes and pulleys to deal with, although he was proud he discovered a way to deal with it all. "What, Heather?" he asked, going back to the tiller, hoping he'd heard wrong. But Toothless' concerned whimper made him think differently.

"Flying on Toothless," she repeated.

"Oh." Hiccup furrowed his brows. He didn't like this vibe he was getting from her, guess he never did. He pulled the ship in swiftly towards the shore, the white sails filling with morning air, creating a swoosh of noise above him. He wasn't heading for the docks this time, but for a little alcove in the shoreline butted up against a thick portion of forest and a gentle slope of island. It was the perfect docking point for avoiding the eyes of the village. He didn't need to use it often, but- He looked back at Heather, her hair still moist from swimming and her frame thin inside her wet clothing- with Astrid probably on the lookout for him from the fiasco of last night, this was the last sight she needed to see. Who knows if she knew about the whole sleepover mess. That could be taken in a million different wrong ways. Toothless perked suddenly, noticing the change in direction, and stationed himself next to Hiccup, throating a question and putting his big eyes at him.

Hiccup winked at him. "Evasive maneuvers, buddy," he whispered, and Toothless purred. Hiccup scratched his forehead playfully and heaved the tiller leftward, sailing the ship in smoothly against the sandbank. The ship thudded onto the shore.

"Well?"

Hiccup turned back to her, not really too keen on this line of questioning.

"I do want to get to know him, and this is such a lovely morning."

Hiccup cleared his throat. "Uh, sure you don't want breakfast first?"

She waved off his words briskly and slinked up towards him, setting a big smile at Toothless, who smarted back in response. She took a deep breath and looked at him. "It will be most enjoyable. I need to get to know him, to knowâ€¦" She tapped a finger on his chest. "â€¦you."

He swallowed, backed away quickly. "Ah, yeahâ€¦" Toothless slipped under his arm quickly, throating a concern. Hiccup thought fast. This Heather wasn't letting up, was she? Maybe Astrid was right, that she was making eyes at him. The thought filled him with an icky horror. The last thing he needed was to have Astrid see him playing over their first special time together with another girl. "Toothless, you won't tell on me, right, buddy?" he whispered.

Toothless cocked his head, hummed, eyes big.

Hiccup gulped again. Better to get the thing over with before the formal training; right now, Astrid was hopefully still at home, maybe in the Hall eating breakfast or taking care of Stormfly. Better to get it done while Astrid wasn't around, instead of later. Heather seemed like a person who wasn't going to give up on this matter.

"We'll just make it a quick flight, okay?"

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Toothless kept back the tempting notion to lash out at the girl and scare the silly smile off her face. "Toothless, don't you want to like her? Why don't you like her?" Hiccup patted his head gently and Toothless hummed, ending it with a sharper snort.

She just gave him bad vibes, that's all. Don't ask a dragon why. It just is.

Toothless slinked over to the edge of the ship, against the cold metal sides, and slipped down, flapping his tail over the panels, his body in a gentle curve over the deck. The morning light was brighter now, and his head was in the shadows, the darker cast spreading out over the ship, from the sides of the boat. He peeked up, looked at Heather sitting on the rowing bench, watching him, the light gold on her. He snorted. Too pretty for her.

Hiccup sat on the deck besides him suddenly and whispered to him, a concerned lilt in his voice. "Just humor me, okay, bud?" The boy ran a hand through his shock of red hair, and Toothless knew this was something he really wanted right now. He hummed. "Heather just wants to fly on you a little bit," Hiccup said, in a barely audible voice. "I don't think she's going to let up, and I hate to have Astrid see

us together. Right now it's perfect. Can you see that?"

Those sad eyes were sure to get him. Toothless hummed, shook his head into Hiccup lovingly. _Cheer up, okay? Of course I understand._ He didn't like it, but it was one of those human conflicts, and he was beginning to get the picture. He opened his mouth and continued to nudge him, getting in the groove of it and sweeping the boy into the curve of his body, nuzzling him until the kid laughed. He squeezed his head against him warmly, couldn't help but give a smile. Hiccup did this thing he called a "hug" sometimes to him, and hopefully his version was understandable.

Hiccup's smile told him he was successful at least in his main goal. The boy stroked the side of Toothless' head. "Thanks, bud."

Toothless throated a grin. _Let's get this stuff over with._

He never really enjoyed people on his back other than Hiccup. Meaning, _I only do it for Hiccup._ He withheld a growl as Heather jumped onto his back and shifted her weight on the saddle. She grinned at him and patted his side. Toothless hummed something irritated, somehow _everything_ she did seemed fake. His throaty complaints stopped as Hiccup swung his leg over the saddle and he saw that weary look on him. _Hey, don't worry, bud, it's not gonna be that bad._ Hiccup clicked the prosthetic in place, and Toothless could feel his other tail go into motion. He hummed something pleasant up at him and closed his eyes as Hiccup leaned down and patted him.

He spread his wings out suddenly and faced the wide open sea. He rose high up into the sky, facing the sun, the wind and crisp air swelling around them, rose up high and hovered there in the sky a moment. Evasive maneuvers, Hiccup had said? He skimmed down dramatically, skirting the waves, barely touching the gold-tinted waters, pleased, oh so very pleased, to have the girl shout with surprise.

I guess I wiped the silly smile off her face. Mission accomplished.

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"Whoa!" Hiccup shouted as Toothless dived. Heather shrieked in a scared way he thought wasn't possible and her arms went round him suddenly, the fingers lacing tight around his chest, her elbows at his hips. His nerves sparked, but _it's only because she's afraid right now._ He gulped, thankful Astrid wasn't around. She was leaning into him heavily and he turned back to look at her. She was honestly afraid.

But then her face changed and she calmed, snapped her head to lock eyes with him, in a tense way as if trying to get a grip on the situation. "So, uh, how did you make this dragon like you?"

Hiccup maneuvered the stirrup as Toothless made a move to rise and his wings pounded up and down on either side of him. Hiccup squinted in the wind. "Well," he called back to her, "like I said last night, it's about trust. I didn't kill him, and he didn't kill me."

Toothless hummed something up at him, and Hiccup patted his head. "We

understand each other." Toothless throatled a grin, swept forward swiftly and sailed through the air, towards the sun that was now breaking out clear from the pink clouds on the horizon. The wind whipped Hiccup's hair away from his face and for a moment, he forgot about Heather there against his back. It was just him and the wind, and Toothless' firm neck under him, the black scales shimmering in the morning, the dragon's wings wide and long and beautiful and breathing with the gasp of wind sailing through them. Wisps of filaments brushed white across the sky, wider near the horizon and filming out to thin strands at the ends, reaching out across the dome of the sky like delicate spider webs. He inhaled the salty air, fresh and pure, ran his hand over Toothless' neck, grateful for the beauty, for his friend, whispering almost to himself, "Thanks, Toothless."

Something got close to the left side of his face suddenly, and he noticed she was whispering there beside him, her lips touching his ear briefly. "He's a wonderful dragon. Soâ€¦ powerful."

He leaned away, to the right, quickly. "Yeah, he _is_amazing."

"I'd love to fly him."

Hiccup raised his brows, not sure exactly what was meant by those words. He glanced back, saw her face downturned, gazing at his foot in the stirrup. Watching, studying, how he moved it. An eerie feeling crept up his back. He looked away.

Toothless suddenly throatled something sharp and concerned. Hiccup glanced up to where he was looking, saw a blue dragon flying up towards them. He was sharply conscious of Heather's position next to him, arms all over him, her legs butted up against his.

"Oh noâ€¦!"

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Astrid hadn't bargained on _this_when she went out looking for him. "Hiccup!" she called to the flying black shape silhouetted against the sky. The dragon wavered back slightly and she leaned down on Stormfly, urging her forward.

She'd spent almost two hours of the early morning looking for him, and she'd asked everyone, even Bucket, for signs of the kid. Hiccup wasn't at home, the first place she checked, and Stoick hadn't any idea where he was. He mentioned something about also not knowing where Heather was, either, a strange comment which made her ask what it meant.

"Heather is our guest," he had explained. "She asked to sleep over at our house."

"Guest?" She glanced around, looking for a second bed somewhere on the first floor.

"I was hoping they'd get along."

In the same room, I guess, you mean, Astrid huffed in her mind, feeling inside her a certain thing commonly called jealousy. But Stoick was blissfully ignorant of relationship protocols, and she

figured it'd be a losing battle to try to enlighten him. She hopped on Stormfly and went searching the whole town. Sven had told her that Hiccup's _Night Fury_wasn't in the docks.

She flapped up to Hiccup, shocked to find Heather sitting on Toothless next to him. Fire welled up inside her, and a few good insults that she'd always wanted to use came drifting into mind.

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"What are you _talking_about?"

"Just some new girl isn't going to go taking over _my_Hiccup, that's all-"

Hiccup winced. "_Astrid?_" He was feeling _very_uncomfortable right now as Stormfly's fretting wings nearly collided with Toothless' for the third time. "Isn't this something private?" His voice got small all of a sudden.

Heather's voice was livid behind him. "Who are you anyway, to speak to me like that?"

"Ah-" he started, feeling horrendously red right now, cut off suddenly by a low murmur from- He glanced down. "Toothless?"

Astrid shouted suddenly and Stormfly's wings pounded close to him. "I don't care if she's a chief or chieftess or whatever you are."

Heather lashed her arm apart from Hiccup suddenly and leaned her elbow on his back. She smarted, Toothless made another mutter, and Hiccup felt a cringe shiver through him. This was getting way out of hand now. "Guys-" he shouted, stumbling on his words. "I mean-_girls_-"

Astrid flapped up closer suddenly, irritation all over her face.

"Could you just quit it? This is getting ridiculous."

Astrid let out a hissed whisper and Heather jabbed her elbow on his back, as if using him for an armrest, a hot gasp escaping her lips. Toothless grunted up at him again, and Hiccup glanced down at him, the concern in his eyes taking his attention finally. The girls were shouting some more and Hiccup willfully ignored it, leaned down to his dragon. "What is it, Toothless?"

Toothless hummed, shot his head forward across the ocean, swept lower and sailed his wings out flat. Hiccup looked forward-

"Hiccup, I need to talk to you when we get down."

-saw the blank expanse of water, waves highlighted by the sun-

"I don't like your attitude, whatever your name is!"

-the thin mist of morning fog coating the sea, growing thicker and heavier moving off into the distance, and then the spires of rocks building on each other-

"It's Astrid and don't you forget it."

-increasing in density, climaxing at the jagged point of Dragon Island.

Smoke.

He jerked his head up to see filaments of dark, almost black smoke waft out from the volcano on the horizon. He hadn't seen that before. Hopefully it didn't mean "Toothless, take us in, all right, buddy?"

The dragon lolled approval, swept forward. Like he said before, Vikings were stubborn and mining on a volcano didn't faze them. But he'd seen certain signs, over the course of their mining, the blasting of the mountain on Toothless, and he didn't like it. The thing was an explosion waiting to happen - literally. Now the smoke. He needed to see what was going on down there. Plus, it was a good excuse to get these girls pried apart.

Something sharp and biting came hurling out of Astrid's mouth and he noticed them again all of a sudden. "Hey!" he shouted, ignorant of the latest development in the argument. "I'm heading for Dragon Island, there's something going on there." He snapped the prosthetic sharply, sent Toothless up. The dragon roared in pleasure, folded in his wings and then dived, sailing out towards the landmass in the distance.

"Hiccup-" Astrid shouted back, her voice vanishing as Toothless sped forward, a strange urgency in him. Heather slapped her arms around him again, and Hiccup smarted. "Slow it down a bit, eh?" he told Toothless. "We don't need to get there that fast, and we don't want " He looked back, saw Astrid heaving Stormfly into a dive, twirling down at them for maximum speed. "Yup, we don't need her thinking I'm trying to get away." "Toothless-" He turned back to the dragon, the wings suddenly banking as they flew past towering rocks appearing through the fog at the last moment. Heather's arms tightened around him.

He didn't like the feel of her arms around him. Dragon Island was coming up now. He directed Toothless lower and they skirted the water, the dive making her arms stiffer, her fingers lacing around each other, pressing closer into him. "I'm just going to check out the smoke. You can see the mines while we're at it," he said, over the rush of the sudden wind that swirled around Helheim's Gate. "And the metal - you can see that, too." She didn't respond, only hugged him closer and brought her legs nearer his, near the stirrup, the one boot of hers nudging his right foot and the other shifting up and down gently by his prosthetic. He turned his head and saw her eyes consumed with thinking, looking at his feet and at the stirrups, mumbling something to herself that he could not hear. Her body shifted closer to his and her arms released him suddenly, moved down to where his hands were, on the handles of metal near the top of the saddle. She got a satisfied look on her face which frightened Hiccup and he leaned forward, pushing her arms out from the stirrup holds. He didn't like this feeling he was getting. "Toothless?" he whispered, and the dragon eyed him with concern. "Faster, buddy."

The dragon swept swiftly over the rocky shore, jolted to a landing. Stormfly plopped down next to them, and Hiccup could sense that the Nadder was breathless. "Astrid, did you fly her too fast?"

"Only enough to catch up with you." She jumped off the dragon and flicked her hand. "Get off, I need to talk to you. And you-" She pointed to Heather. "You stay here."

Hiccup sensed the girl behind him stiffen, spat out an insulted huff. "Sure, Astrid," he said, trying to be cheerful. Up ahead, he saw the fingers of smoke oozing out of that cave created by the monstrous dragon he'd killed two years before. The thing looked dangerous. He slipped out of Heather's grasp, noting how Astrid was watching his waistline closely, and how the girl's arms slipped off from around him.

Hiccup landed on the gravel, a sudden warmth shooting through his boot. His eyebrows shot up. A hotness like this wasn't a good sign; it was never this hot before, and everything he knew about volcanoes told him this was just the beginning. It could be earthquakes, rockslides, and of course the obvious eruption. Mining would have to go on a hiatus. He had to get Dad to pull the stuff out of here. Astrid had started walking away slowly, motioning him to follow.

"Can we make this quick?" Hiccup called out, catching up with her. "I need to tell Dad-"

"Quick?" Astrid's voice popped in. "You aren't going to just brush this off that easily, Hiccup."

The tone in her voice made him realize he had to clear the books with her. She was taking this seriously. "There's nothing to brush off, Astrid, because nothing happened."

"Yeah, I heard." She crossed her arms. He sighed. Here comes the irony. "Just sleeping in the same room all night, all that alone time-"

"Hey-" Hiccup tried to stop her.

"Spending a lovely morning alone on the most beautiful boat on Berk." She put a finger up quickly. "Don't bother objecting to that. Sven told me."

"I wasn't-"

"And to top it all, a flight on Toothless. Alone. I, me, your one-and-only, doesn't even get that too often. Who do you think you're fooling?"

"Listen, Astrid, what you say may be true-"

"Oh! So you admit to liking Heather. I thought you'd neverâ€¦!"

"No, Astrid, that's not what I said." She squinted at him, weight on one hip. He imagined it might be playful irony, but he doubted it now. She was really mad at him.

"Listen, Astrid, it's circumstantial evidence." He dug his metal foot

into the gravel, made a pointed metal-on-stone noise.

"Getting technical, eh?"

"No, getting factual." He shot a finger in her face. "You have to believe me. I had no part in getting her into my room, and she came up to my ship on her own, and she, well, she just sort of forced me to fly her on Toothless. You know how much she wanted to fly him from last night."

Astrid sighed, and Hiccup tried on a look of conviction to dispel any other doubts. "Now, Astrid, I'm going to have to let you believe me, because I did come here to check on this smoke I see coming out of here and I-"

"Hiccup!" she shouted suddenly, her arm jabbing towards the cavern. She hissed a shout and sprinted forward, and Hiccup realized the plume of smoke puffing out in waves from the mouth of the cave. Stormfly was squawking somewhere near the entrance, distress in her voice. "Toothless!" Hiccup shrieked suddenly. He wasn't in sight - and Heather. She wasn't in sight, either.

"Stormfly, don't tell me they're both in there," he screamed, running past the dragon, who hummed desperately.

Astrid was shouting at him, telling him to squint his eyes, the dust was murder. "Do you think they're okay?" she called and he clapped his prosthetic against the rocks, ran and dodged the uneven ground, tried to stop himself from falling.

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Toothless kept leaping over the jagged rocky floor, driving farther and farther into the heart of the mountain. Hiccup was having some sort of spat with the sun-haired girl, and he wanted to get back in here, his old home. His claws slipped on loose dragon scales scattered along the cavern bottom, the scales gathering into thick piles like myriads of fallen leaves. He could sense delicate, crackling dragon skins rustling under his toes on the floor, remnants from molting season among the dragons still living on the island. Irregular knobs jutted into his feet; columns of rising volcanic rock rose above him on either side. The whole expanse of the inner mountain base lay hard and jagged, a warmth emanating from its rugged surface. Terribly, wonderfully hot. Hotter than ever since the molten fire had cooled into rock.

He snorted, widened his nostrils at the distinct, familiar scent of smoke heavy in the air, smoke he could feel swirling past him, around him, above him, from the heated cavern floor. He halted, found the somewhat smoothed depression he was seeking besides the base of a column. He curled into it, tucked his feet under him, nudged his nose atop his front legs. His wings folded close against his sides, his tail swept around him, his eyes closed, his body relaxed as the seething warmth radiated from under the rocks into his legs, his body, his wings, his head, his heart. It overwhelmed his senses, threw a pleasant stupor over him. The warmth. If there was one thing he missed since coming to live on Berk, it was the warmth. Yearlong smothering warmth, hotness from molten rock. Now, there only remained remnants from the living, liquid fire that long ago hardened into stone. The cold air, the storms, had entered from the shattered

mountain opening, enveloping the volcanic heart, hardening cold. The huge dragon that used to writhe in the mountain's depths, somehow the absence of his motions stilled the molten liquid fire until it no longer flowed.

His eyes suddenly shot wide open. A tremor, under him. Was it just the crazy heat seeping through the rocks? Or was it- He threw his mind into focus. A few moments later, clearer this time. Swarming trembles vibrating beneath him, sending faint shivers up his claws and legs and belly. The very bedrock beneath him pulsed small yet distinct rumbles from deep within the very foundation of the mountain. Faster, closer, tighter tremors. Tremors he hadn't felt for dozens of summers, but could never forget.

No, it can't be. He bolted up from the depression, clawed the craggy rocks and leapt away from the cavern's center towards the blinding light of the opening. A slim dark figure stood starkly silhouetted the streaming daylight. That girl, Heather, she was in the cave. She must have followed him in here. Didn't she know caves like this are dangerous places? He screamed at the figure, bounding and accelerating towards her, hopefully getting her to notice and get out of there.

But it was too late. The cavern walls shook and screeched and the very floor shuddered beneath him. He yelped. Columns of rock high above the cavern entrance were shattering, cracking, splitting, falling. He could see the glinting masses of debris racing down towards the shaft of daylight. The girl was trying to run, towards the light, but the rocks raced faster.

One last crashing leap and he pounced atop the girl, knocking her flat hard into the jagged floor. Her scream pierced into his ears and suddenly clawing hands grabbed and clutched at his throat. He squealed, planted his foot squarely on her chest. In a moment he flattened his body over her, flattened his wings, crouched low, shut his eyes.

A moment later, the black blast of rocks snuffed out the light.

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It was black and hot under the dragon. She let out a pained breath, realized with a jolt that he hadn't been attacking her when he threw his wild body on top of her. It was protection. His black, heaving body lowered and closed in all around her - the wings along her sides and the underside of his head stretching over her own. The black shroud of the dragon cut off the light - then the deafening roar shot in her ears, the screaming thuds hitting into the dragon's body and reverberating into her own as the scaled skin pushed into hers with each jolt of the slamming rocks. She shut her eyes, choked as the suffocating dust enveloped the little air underneath the compressed space. Her fingers twisted into tight fists clutching the scaled neck, clutching, clasping, clenching as the thunder roared all around her.

Images snapped into her head suddenly, something she hadn't thought of for years. The cottage, home, Momma, Pappa, fleeing, running, the stream, her running, screaming. She tripped. Pappa! But he didn't come back. She knew he wouldn't come back. The raiders - their thumping feet and shrill screams were almost upon her. The town,

burning. She ran into the woods, screaming. The rocks cut her bare feet, her knees, her hands, crawling through the dirt. Suddenly she fell - the water slapped her face, her hands flailed, her whole body shot through with cold. The stream was too deep, and she was too little. Hot tears stung her eyes.

Then a firm arm grabbed her. She gasped, felt cold. Deep green eyes gazing down at her, firm but gentle, holding her, lifting her, out of the water. Even at that young age, she knew what a raider, a Viking, looked like. He looked like the enemy. But he didn't act like one. He just looked at her, clutched her, carried her back to his ship, cooed her with soft gentle songs. Wrapped her in a blanket, put her on his knee. He said his name was Rune, said she looked like a heather blossom. "Where's your parents?" he asked.

It was then she realized she didn't have any, none besides him. Him who loved her.

A cough shot through Heather's throat; the dragon's throat was muttering. She opened her eyes. Thick blackness, except for a glint of a big green eye gazing down at her, firm but gentle, just looking at her, soothing, purring. A dragon's eye, but there was pain in it. She suddenly realized the rocks, the rocks blanketing over them, shutting them in on every side. The heaving black body between her and the rocks, heaving, breathing hard, staying still. A growl rose up from the dragon's throat, vibrating right above her, the snout snorting at the dust and the head moving and nudging stones around the black prison. She gasped as the claws released their foothold on her chest and slipped to the ground beside her.

"Toothless," she breathed, released the tight grip of her hands around the flesh of his neck, curled her fingers and stroked the black scales above her. She heard the dragon hum slightly, peer down at her. She gazed back into the green eye.

He only looked like an enemy.

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"Heather!" Hiccup shouted, coughing in the dust, barely able to see. He blinked back the itchy air, shielded his eyes and stumbled forward. "_Toothless_", he called, sharp and loud. "Toothless, are you okay?"

"Hiccup-" Astrid was next to him suddenly, her hands touching him and holding on briefly. She coughed and Hiccup turned back, motioned for her to stand back. "It might fall again."

She shook her head and latched a hand on his arm, stumbling forward again, ahead of him, into the swirling dust and darkness of the cavern. He put his right foot over the rocks, clapped his prosthetic on the stones in front of them. He caught his breath as the metal slipped and his hand touched the ground for balance. Her hand latched onto him tighter and he grabbed her arm, rising. He waved a hand in front of his face and stepped forward again, smarting as a sharp stone jabbed into his boot. "Toothless," he called, dust blowing into his mouth, making it go dry. A low hum growled suddenly somewhere in front of him, under the rocks. "_Toothless_-" He jumped forward, kneeling on the rocks, crawling, hands in front of him, following the sound.

Toothless growled again.

"Buddy-"

It was right in front of him. "Toothless, are you okay? Is Heather okay?" The rocks started moving suddenly, nudging his knees, shaking ground under him. Astrid was at his side suddenly, scooping out rocks. The ground trembled thickly, but it wasn't another rock fall. Toothless was trying to escape, shake off the rocks from over him. "We got to get him out," Hiccup gasped, grabbing the stones in front of him. Toothless hummed loudly. Hiccup shoveled the rocks with his arms, setting his left knee farther from him, anchoring himself. He heaved in breath, the dust channeling down his throat and he withheld a cough, tried not to breathe. The rocks jostled up suddenly, crumbled away. Toothless roared, jolted up out of the cover of stones, the warm cloud of fresh dust puffing up into Hiccup's face. Toothless pushed out suddenly, shot out of the pile of rocks, and Hiccup heard a gasp, saw a pair of flailing arms grasping the air from under Toothless.

"Heather!" he shrieked and dived in under Toothless, taking her. She let her arms go limp as the dragon dragged her up, out of the cluster of rocks and lay her on the surface. He squinted, found her face all ash and tense, thought he read a panic in them. "Are you all right?" he gasped out quickly, coughing, and took her hand, tried to get the girl to her feet.

"I- I'mâ€¦" she stammered, stumbling as he tried to motion her upwards. The mountain seemed to rumble again, shiver under his knees, white hot and fuming. The dust swirled again, coupled with a new heat pushing into his face. The sound of rocks falling met his ears again, sharp and crackling and low, increasing towards them.

"Let's get out of here," Astrid said suddenly, taking Heather forcibly from Hiccup, wrapping her arm around the girl's suddenly frail form. "Hiccup, you get on Toothless, that leg is not going to work in this ground."

"Can you two get on Toothless?" Hiccup coughed out, not arguing, stepping towards the dragon, his prosthetic chipping into a crack in the rocks again, caught. He winced, pulled it out with a sliver of noise. He felt them behind him, Astrid shouting something indistinct in the rising noise of rocks crumbling, the sound seemingly increasing with the darkness of the cave. Toothless snorted suddenly next to him, adjusted his body to align with the boy better, and Hiccup grabbed the saddle's metal rings, swung his legs over Toothless. The dragon jolted up towards the two figures coming near. Astrid pounded up quickly to the dragon, pushed Heather's form up besides Hiccup. "I canâ€¦ take careâ€¦" Heather mumbled, then stopped, her eyes awake suddenly, aware. "Hang on, Astrid, and keep her secure," Hiccup shouted, looking back at the rumble within the mountain. Chips of rocks began to snap on them, tumbling from above. Something hit the back of Hiccup's head and he didn't look back to see if the rock slide was coming down on them already.

"Go!" Astrid shrieked and Toothless inhaled, flapped up and forward, screaming a thin shrill roar, as the boom of rocks shook behind them. Hiccup leaned down on Toothless, throbbing his prosthetic tensely as Toothless slid on his side and spat through the long wide crack in

the mountain. They hit the fresh air, puffs of smoke oozing out behind them, the sharp clamor of rocks within that cavern. Something was slipping behind him, Hiccup turned back, grabbed Heather's arm with one hand. She was almost falling. Astrid latched a hand to his shoulder harness suddenly, grunting sharply as the flying motion wavered her precariously on Toothless' back. Hiccup lashed at the stirrup again. "Toothless, get down. Just hold on, Astrid." The dragon growled, swooped down towards the graveled shore, into the puffs of dust settling over the landscape. He landed, Hiccup lurched forward, Heather gasped behind him. Hiccup whirled. "Are you okay?" he breathed, squinting his eyes in the dust.

Heather leaned up, using Hiccup for support. He could read a shock in her eyes, an honest breathless surprise. She gasped, coughed in the dust, closed her eyes tight.

"We need to get out of here," Astrid said, sliding off Toothless, eyes darting at the mountain. It was still making rumbles, deep and heavy, Hiccup could feel it under him. Astrid ran off and shouted for Stormfly, and Hiccup turned around in his saddle, tried to get her upright, stop her from sliding. "You okay?"

She opened her eyes, put a hand over them. A gasped breath escaped her.

"That's okay," Hiccup patted her, "we're going home now. I got to tell Dad about this. _Astrid!_" he shouted, found the blue Nadder's near-silhouette in the murky air. "Get flying now."

"What about Heather?" her voice broke into a cough and an exasperated gasp.

"I got her." Hiccup looked back at her. "You got to hold on, okay?"

Heather nodded tightly.

"You sure you can?"

Astrid's voice came through vaguely. "I can carry her." The spark of jealousy was in it again.

"Astrid-" Hiccup whirled to look at her again and tried to give her a look of disapproval. He didn't want to say anything, not now, but Astrid needed to figure out he wasn't trying to _do anything_ here, just get the girl home. She looked so shaken right now, and he didn't know if she was hurt or not. Probably just scars and scratches, butâ€¦ She'd been moved enough.

He flicked Toothless' tail and the dragon hummed, rolled his head, telling the other dragon to follow. Stormfly squawked, opened her wings. The mountain hissed deeply again and Toothless pounced up, into the air, out of the clouds of dust under the ground, the reverberation from the island still smarting the atmosphere, Stormfly's wingbeats thick beside him. He inhaled, the clear air smarting in his lungs, tried to gulp away the dust. He felt Heather's legs realign around him, steady themselves on the moving dragon. He felt her shiver, lean her head tensely into the back of his shoulder, lay her right arm across his waist, resting lightly across his lap. He put his head down, didn't want to turn to look at her. She

seemedâ€¦ unnerved, somehow. Frail.

She cleared her throat suddenly, put her other hand, the fingers lightly fisted, on the top of his leg. "This Toothless," she said, leaning forward to his left, looking down at the dragon.

"Yeahâ€¦?" Hiccup asked, tense suddenly.

"What a dragonâ€¦" she breathed, letting out a breath, her mouth moving in words she apparently didn't want to voice. There was a certain awe in the words, yet almost a certainâ€¦ what was it? He looked to the side, at her face, the eyebrows that were pressed together, the intensity in her eyes, the lips pursed with purpose. Her hand clenched suddenly, and the arm around his waist pressed in tightly, and he gulped, suddenly afraid of what this girl was thinking.

He looked on ahead, at the wide speck of land that was Berk. He didn't want to talk to her, looked up ahead and urged Toothless onward with a gentle pat from the stirrup. Toothless hummed, turned his head up and looked at him. Hiccup curved his brows at him. The dragon probably knew what he was thinking, maybe. He only wanted to get away from Heather now, get back to Astrid, talk to Dad. He needed to tell him about the rockslide.

He tensed again as he felt Heather looking at him closely. What was it about her that made him alarmed like this?

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He spotted his father on the cliffs of Berk, looking up at the sky. A slight gathering of villagers were gathered there around him, like pools of water after a storm, drifting in and out of each other, the shadows from the rising sun creating indistinct puddles of darkness slanting behind them. He looked out at Astrid, flying on Stormfly to his left, the blue wings flapping into a hover. Toothless responded with a hesitation of his own. Hiccup flapped closer to her, shouted, "You take care of Heather, okay?"

She grumbled, glared at him.

"I need to talk to Dad."

Heather, behind him, spoke sharply, suddenly. "I'm not hurt."

"Really?" Hiccup turned back. "Those scratches look pretty nasty."

She brought a hand up to where he was looking, a spot on the side of her cheek, took her hand away and looked down at the scuffed red on it.

Hiccup turned away, swept Toothless down, let his big wings take in the air and glide gently down into the edge of the village. They pounded to a halt, and Hiccup snapped loose his prosthetic from the stirrup, leapt off the saddle. He turned and put his hands out for Heather. She blinked, glanced at him, looked away and jumped off on the other side. Hiccup raised his brows, put his hands on Toothless' saddle. The dragon hissed gently at the girl and Hiccup patted him.

He had to figure out what was this thing about her. Stormfly caught his eye suddenly, pounded down next to them. Hiccup felt a bit of tension in the air and the two girls met. Astrid was doing an admirable job, really, of keeping her conflict with the girl to an acceptable minimum, acceptable of course meaning quite different things to different people. He sighed as she shot a critical eye to Heather.

"I don't think those scratches are all that bad. I get far worse on practice," Astrid hummed.

Hiccup sighed. Yeah, he couldn't deny that. He patted Toothless once and made his way for the mass of people who he noticed were gaining on him anyway, his father in the lead.

"Dad!"

Hiccup suddenly noticed the curious look on his father's face, and Phlegma - Astrid's mom beside him, shooting concerned eyes at Astrid. Hiccup looked down at himself and back at Toothless. "Oh, thatâ€¦" The two of them were coated in a strange dust, filming white over Toothless' wings and body, scuffed out where he and Heather and Astrid had sat, thick in the corners of the dragon's legs and body. He looked down at himself, dusted over with the same coating, his harness and tunic turning a pale monochrome. "Man, I must look terrible." He chuckled, looked up at his Dad.

His father glared down at him. "What have you been up to?" His round eyes drifted over Hiccup's body. "You've been away for several hours, don't you remember about the training you had to do? I-"

"Okay, Dad, yeah, I get it." Hiccup put a hand out, jabbed his palm at him. "It's just things got a little tumbling out of hand, that's all." His father leaned back, waited for the answer. "You took Heather with you on your shenanigans, you think that was wise?"

"Hey, I didn't _take_her, Dad."

"She looks like a mess," his father hummed as Heather came walking smartly towards them, swishing her black, whitened hair over her shoulder and snapping some under-the-breath remarks at Astrid, who was standing, weight on one leg, next to Stormfly. She glanced at Hiccup and he leaned back instinctively, rolling on his heels, or _heel_ in this case. He found himself almost tripping over backwards. Something held him up suddenly. _Toothless_. "Thanks, bud," he said, resting an arm on the dragon's head. Heather picked up her pace, passing by Stoick and making her way over into the village and town center.

Hiccup looked back at his father, stepped up and got in front of him. The thick red beard was scuffed up this morning, like he'd had a bad night, maybe, or forgot to comb it out this week. Hiccup took a breath, looked at the rest of villagers behind his father. "Uh, Dad, the mine isn't safe anymore."

His father's eyes looked over him again, a dawn of realization settling on his face. "A cave-in?"

Hiccup brushed off his shoulder quickly, the dust puffing out from

his hand. "Toothless got caught in it - and Heather, but he saved her, luckily."

"You were _caught_in it?"

"Mostly Heather and - and Toothless," Hiccup corrected, suddenly feeling the stickiness of the dust on his scalp. "Astrid and me were outside the cave for the most part, when the slide happened." He scratched his head, grimaced to find more figments of rock spill down over him.

His father put a big hand on Hiccup, sending a cloud of dust into Hiccup's face. "You better get inside, wash up." Hiccup coughed suddenly. Volcanic rock had poor aromatic properties. He tried to nod an agreement, but his body only shivered in another cough. "Get Astrid cleaned up, too, we still have that training you need to do, and your last Induction formation." He guided Hiccup forward, towards the plaza and their house. "Is Heather hurt?"

"Oh, don't worry, Dad," he managed before another bout, "she- she's okay. Told me so herself." Toothless was suddenly at his side, humming in great concern and nuzzling his right arm, which was hanging down purposelessly to his side. Hiccup tensed a smile, not wanting to start another series of coughs, patted the dragon. Astrid was close behind, her face and hair smudged with green, but most of the whiteness gone. He looked at her questioningly and she shrugged. "Grass worked pretty well."

"Well, you missed a spot," Hiccup smiled at her, pointing vaguely at her face.

"Hm!" She smiled to herself, then suddenly looked at him again, the playfulness hesitant. She glanced up at Stoick there besides them, the humming Toothless between him and her, a couple random villagers following them towards town. Hiccup knew there was something she didn't want to say out loud in front of everyone. It probably had something to do with Heather. "We'll talk later, okay?" he prodded, leaning towards her. She smirked, slowed her pace and let them pass her.

"Sure," she said, almost ironically, and Hiccup looked back, watched her drag her feet towards her house, her thin arms swinging from either side of her.

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"I'll have you know that dragon saved my life," Heather hotly whispered to Brandr. The hulking Skirra VÃ©llite council member still stared across the plaza at the Night Fury, a powdery cake of dust still filming over the black dragon's skin. She saw the dragon flick his head, snort, shake the dust off his nose as he nudged into Hiccup's shoulder from behind. Brandr's own head shook, as if in response.

She turned and faced him, faced her whole War Council who she had called together for this newsflash she was about to give them. Ten warriors standing in a circle around her in the plaza, shielding her from the Hooligan houses rising above them all around. The wall of their bodies, covered in mail armor and thick flowing mantles, carved-handled axes and hatchets, gold bracelets and dragon-scaled

helmets. She usually felt safe, trusted, within the circle, the circle her father had put under her only eight months before, on her Induction Day. But not today. Gamal, the trusty one, his graying whiskered beard ratted yet strong, was gazing dubiously at her, his silence telling; Ragnar, her father's brutal best, a scowl on his face, his mouth twitching in readiness for his turn to speak; Brandr, oh so impetuous, yet now his eyes clouded in deliberate thought. What was going through that mind? She pursed her lips, determined to douse any doubts before they took to the air.

"The plan has changed. The Night Fury - we're not killing him. Find another prize dragon if you like, but I'm definite on this."

Brandr, towering a full foot above her, edged nearer, the dragon-toothed necklace jangling near her eyes. She glanced upward, saw the loathing set deep in his brows, the insult of his spat with the Night Fury still fresh. His lips moved to speak, but she preempted him. "Last night's fiasco is not going to be your conscience in the matter," she said, sharply.

His eyes suddenly bulged down at her, his voice sputtering in his attempt to fit it into a whisper. "Conscience! With all due respect, I don't care for your language. After the humiliation that Night Fury and this mackerel of an heir heaped on me last night, I have every right to deal with the both of them myself." He pointedly bobbed the shimmering axe up and down, the flat metal surface visibly indented by a crescent of Toothless's teeth where the dragon had disarmed the warrior the night before.

Heather shot a stern stare back at him, her feet planting themselves into the stones of the plaza. She could feel the other council members hushing as she and Brandr glared at one another. Dad had told her how to handle a rash, headstrong warrior like Brandr. _Be firm, be fair, don't let his will override your own._ She didn't have to do it many times before, he usually knew his place, but now-

She took a breath, replied. "The boy and the Night Fury - they are mine, and mine alone, to deal with. Brandr, you will get your chance when the war starts. But for now, stay away from that dragon."

Brandr took a breath, had one more thing to say. "Well, that dragon happens to be the obstacle standing in front of our whole operation. Such as the fact that Stoick's son is still alive!"

Heather smarted. It felt like a rebellious statement, somehow. She started to say something-

"Shush," Gamal motioned suddenly, started moving out of the circle as the Hooligan chief and his son passed by with an entourage of Hooligans and dragons crowding alongside them.

"Right this way," Stoick boomed with jollity to a couple nearby Skirra Vål warriors. "Your gift dragons and flight tutors are waiting in the Dragon Academy." The Hooligan chief's booming voice erupted in pleasure, his big hand slapping the back of his slightly-built heir. Heather observed the sight, almost thought she had gotten used to the image of these two people. By tomorrow they'd be gone. Or at least one of them. A shiver rolled up her spine all of a sudden. Raids were never this deliberate or thought-out. Certainly

not this premeditated. Her hand moved to her waist, her hips. She'd left her sword and mantle at the ship that morning chasing after the kid. She'd have to get Hervi to retrieve it for her.

She looked ahead, saw that her council had already begun filing into the line of people moving towards the Dragon Academy, stepping onto a narrow bridge over a chasm, towards a chain-ceilinged structure set into the rock ahead of them. She sprinted down, slapped a foot onto the hanging panels of the winding bridge, ran across it. She found Gamal in the midst of the tribesmen, silently summoned him near her. "Get Hervi here," she said quickly, and nudged her head towards her ships down below. The quiet warrior nodded his head briefly, turned back against the flow of Hooligans across the bridge. Her council began to surround her now and separate her from the Hooligans on the bridge. Ragnar moved alongside her, an anxious, unusual gait in his step. His big palm smoothed over the thick blond stubble, thoughtfully. "Well?" she prodded.

He looked at her, his eyes then glancing at a sudden swish of wings overhead, a colorful green-and-gray Nadderhead ridden by a Hooligan warrior heading for the events of the Dragon Academy. Ragnar motioned his chin towards the sight. "That's just it. Brandr hit on just the tip of our problems. If killing Stoick's heir is complicated by his Night Fury, imagine what we're up against with each Hooligan having his own dragon defending him. Don't get me wrong-" he waved a finger at her, the swish of his motions clanging his sword against the metal mail. "I've fought and bested the best warriors in battle and I've cut off the heads of the best dragons in hunts, but putting the two together." He shook his head, regretfully. "While you were out this morning, I scouted the place. The village is pitifully small, but the number of dragons infesting it is epidemic. It's worse than even last night inside the Great Hall. They roost all over the roofs, by the sides of the houses, roving the streets of their own free will. There's absolutely no control - no discipline! - of these semi-wild beasts. Bad enough to live here, let alone invade the place."

She gazed up at the air, filling with dragons, from every corner of the island converging on the Academy. Flaming red and speckled Monstrous Nightmares, squawking blue Nadderheads, dirt-brown Gronckles, willowy-headed yellow Zipplebacks. Hooligan riders atop them all, flying expertly, beautifully. Not to mention the black dragon, the Night Fury, standing at the entrance of the Academy, the very symbol of the place bearing his proud figure.

"That's one reason we're going along with Stoick's wishes," she said, facing her council. "To learn how the enemy works." She stepped back, put her hand out gently. "This is your order, men." The hulking forms stiffened. "Find out everything these people know about dragons. Learn how they move, what makes them angry, why they are tame, how they are tame. Leave no stone unturned. Be interested, be very interested. Tomorrow's battle may depend on it."

"How about finding a way to eliminate them quickly?" Brandr asked, as if he had an idea in his head already.

She raised a brow, wasn't sure what he was thinking. "I'm not leaving out that possibility. If you can find a way to incapacitate Stoick's dragon force, we'll take it. It depends on what we learn about them."

Brandr grinned, keenly. She smirked, never too pleased to make him smile, but this was far more important. She turned away, headed for the bridge. Hervi was stepping off the end of it already, his gnarled figure clad in the rough gray tunic. Her smile lessened as the wrinkles under his eyes appeared more tired than cheery. He of all people was almost always happy, the pressure, the responsibility, the sadness of life never seemed to touch him. She motioned him aside from the streaming line towards a quiet area above the ring below, metal bars encircling the ring next to them. Hooligans all around were standing by, looking into the ring, watching her council and the training.

"What's the matter, Hervi?" she asked, quietly, watching him closely. She could see the aged face cautious, his lips carefully choosing his words silently, consciously. Finally he spoke. "I heard you no longer want to kill the Night Fury."

"Yes," she said simply. Gamal must have told him, she thought suddenly, smarting. It wasn't his place to be telling things to her slave, not official decisions like this. She looked up again, saw Hervi looking past her, into the ring. She glanced to her right, saw the black dragon entering the ring to join the other dragons assembling there. There was a tenseness in his lips, words about to be spoken. "And?" she prodded.

"But you stillâ€¦" His eyes moved down past the dragon, to the little figure kneeling by his head, stroking him, and making happy gestures before guiding him towards the other dragons. Hervi cleared his throat, said quietly. "You still are going to killâ€¦ him?"

She turned to Hervi, knew he was never fond of the idea, but this look of disapproval on him, it was surprisingly sharp. Dangerously sharp. She raised a brow. "I don't do this for a whim. Killing Toothless - you heard what he did for me. It would be meaningless, wrong. But with Hiccup-" She swallowed suddenly, to speak his name, it was far too personal. "-with this, this son of Stoick's, his death would set things right again. You understand." It wasn't a question.

Hervi did not answer, continued staring down at the boy and the dragon.

"Hervi, you look at me," she commanded.

He hesitated briefly, turned and looked at her.

"You don't do anything without my say, you understand?"

He sighed, nudged up his head in the smallest way.

"Now enough with that," she flipped her hair smartly to the side. "I called for you to pick up my sword and mantle, left on the ship I had you take for me this morning. It's anchored out that way." She pointed at the sea, a certain spot where a dot of a ship could be seen. "You will get it for me."

Hervi put his head down briefly. "Yes, Master, of course."

She watched him go, pursed her lips together. He usually called her that when he disapproved of something. Somehow the subtle censure

from him struck her. She turned and looked down at the dragons - the other dragons, put Hervi out of her head.

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Hiccup took a deep breath, inhaled the calm, cool evening air. He looked out, felt and closed his eyes, the wind against his skin, lifting the tufts of hair from his face, bristling his eyebrows and wafting past his ears. Fingers of air lifted his harness epaulets from his shoulders, tickled down the collar of his tunic, played along his sleeves. A waft of ash, still raining from the volcano's sudden activity, dusted down on him, like wisps of petals brushing his skin. He opened his eyes, watched the evening sky pink along the horizon, turning gently into gold and sun-rimmed clouds, and above him, a growing mass of dark gray clouds, thick and soft and threatening. He stroked Toothless gently, and the dragon hummed, a warm throaty hum, as he still looked out at the sunset, at the golden orb descending slowly into the sea. The dragon's wings spread motionless and wide around him, the ocean far under him, the air all around, the wind carrying him softly, silently towards the unreachable edge of the world.

Hiccup let the wonder sink into him, a moment of innocence, purity. "This is it, Toothless," he whispered, leaning down to Toothless' ear. "Induction, tomorrow." The dragon grveled a sound.

"Are you worried for me?"

Toothless smarted, jabbed his head and hummed.

Hiccup smiled, rubbed the dragon's forehead. "Wish you can be there for me, but I guess the main part I'd have to go alone."

He looked out at the south corner of the island, a host of ships anchored near. The Skirra VÃ©llite ships, for tomorrow. His father had invited them for his Induction. Those same ships he'd seen not so long ago. They looked threatening then, the wood of their hulls cracked and deteriorating. Now, in the pink of the sunset and the lilt of the happy sea, they looked different.

Hiccup turned around, felt the wings of the kids' dragons under and besides him. He looked back briefly, saw the small mass of his tribesmen assembled on the edge of the cliff, his father at the fore, watching. Quietly watching. This last practice run before the official test of maturity. He smirked at the thought.

It was just a simple formation run, him at the lead of course. It was supposed to take place at the end of the ceremony, when he'd finally get into Dad's Council. It wasn't a big deal to practice, but Gobber left it as the last thing to do before Induction, _to ease yer mind, he said._ He glanced at the rest of the teens, drifting along on the evening breeze, a certain silence in them. The sight of the golden sunset, or was it because he wasn't going to be a part of them anymore?

"Keep in formation, guys," he called down at them, turning his head to the side and adjusting his stirrup. "Heading south." Toothless banked and Stormfly, under him, followed. Hookfang banked along from his right, BelchBarf from his left, and Meatlug from behind.

"Good job, guys," he called, checking on them. Good job. He looked down at Astrid, her face pensive and moody all of a sudden. "Astrid?" he shouted down. She looked up.

"What's wrong?" he asked, tried to be as quiet as he could, in case it was something about Heather, still, though he doubted it. They hadn't talked about it yet, in depth, mostly because they'd been carted from training straight to this last Induction Day dry run.

She whispered something to Stormfly and the dragon lifted up gently, rose closer to Toothless. She flapped Stormfly up, alongside Toothless, broke the formation. "The Skirra VÃ©l," she said simply, angling the Nadder to the left to see him from below.

"Yeah?" Hiccup made a motion to the others, a special hand gesture that was supposed to indicate a change of pattern. _Isa Pattern_, after the straight-edged letter of the alphabet. Hopefully they remembered it.

"They seem to want to know everything about our dragons, yet did you catch the way they barely even wanted to fly one? It's like they didn't really _care_to_ bond with them."

"It's such a shame!" Fishlegs, on the far right, said.

"I thought it was flattering of them, personally," Snotlout, on Hiccup's right, retorted. He swept on slightly ahead with his Nightmare. "They recognized me for the dragon expert I am," he huffed and Hiccup turned a lip, urged Toothless on to keep up the pattern.

"Yeah, that was insane, wasn't it?"

Hiccup whirled, looked to the far left, at Tuffnut lolling in a relaxed pose on Belch's head.

"You shut your face," Snotlout snapped, grinning at him.

"Cool it, bro." Tuff gave him a lopsided salute.

Astrid clicked her tongue, made a noise to get their attention. Stormfly flapped, and Toothless backed away slightly to avoid the wings. "Listen, guys," she said, loud above the rushing air, "it's the way they picked our brains about our dragons, the way they _still_ don't really want to _know_ them, if you get my drift. It's _not_ flattering, it'sâ€¦"

"Suspicious?" Hiccup continued to watch the sunset, the clouds above him glinting in the pink that was glowing brighter now, the tufts of ash still floating in the air.

Snotlout was shrugging his shoulders. "You're reading way too much into this stuff."

"Maybe it's just that they started that way? Maybe they're afraid to bond," Fishlegs said gently.

"I doubt it," Astrid came at him. "I'm getting double feelings over here, the way the Skirra VÃ©l do things."

"Or just Heather?" Ruffnut, from the far left. Tuffnut snickered and Snotlout made some girlish giggling noise.

"No, Ruff," Astrid snapped. "Now you guys shut up."

Hiccup shook his head. "Maybe you want to think about the significance of this?" he spoke out, clear. "I mean, I hate to bring this up, but I'm about to get creamed tomorrow, in front of two tribes, and then there's this thing with my Dad- I mean, I still haven't talked to him about them. In depth, I mean. I just know there's something more. Remember that weird thing you heard, Astrid?"

"What, the one about someone wanting to bump you off?" Snotlout jabbed in suddenly.

"Yeah, Snotlout, and don't look so happy about it." Hiccup leaned back and peered at him.

"I wasn't happy, I just thought it was funny."

"Funny?"

Tuffnut cut in suddenly, "Maybe the idiot means it's ridiculous that anyone would want to eliminate such a harmless little guy."

Astrid smirked. "You have the oddest way of putting things."

Hiccup rolled his eyes. "Okay, let's get it together, all right, guys? The point is, there's still a mystery about everything right now, and I'm sure the Skirra VÃ©l have almost everything to do with it. I get the feeling that if we get to the bottom of this, we'll find out what's making this tribe act the way it is, towards dragons, towards everyone." He turned, looked forward. "Somehow I think my Dad has the answers to all of this."

The kids stared at him. Astrid turned and looked at the sunset on Hiccup's right. She shook her head. "We'll have to get it out of him somehow, then." She jabbed a finger at the twins suddenly. Hiccup looked, saw Tuff in motion with a flat hand on his throat.

"And not like that," Astrid snapped.

Tuffnut sniffed, lolled his shoulders. "There just ain't enough chances to be a threatening assassin."

Hiccup tapped Toothless forward. You guysâ€¦ just shut up. He smiled down at Toothless. "We're going on Ur now, positions ready." He looked behind him, watched the dragons fall into a gentle V-pattern. He sailed on in the lead, the sky beginning to mist with a gentle blur of rain. He squinted as the sun poked one final time through a cloud on the horizon. The air was sticky, warm. A rush of wind hit him suddenly, just one passing stream of air, cold and sharp against him, slicing past his cheek and into his ear, smarting over his hair. He flinched. The sky above had grown suddenly darker by this time, the roiled masses black almost in places, near Berk, and to the east. The clouds of ash swirled around him thicker, filled his hair and coated Toothless. "Storm's coming, eh, bud?" His hand rubbed Toothless and the dragon hummed, a curious, cautious hum, looking up

into the sky.

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The metal was cold, tough and thick to the touch. She ran her hand over the panel, over the curve of leather around it, the delicate rigging and the triangular shaped footrest.

She hadn't really thought of a way to spare the prize dragon. All she knew was that she didn't want him dead at the end of this.

Heather stepped away from the little overhang at the side of the chief's house, took one long look again at the stirrup hanging gently there. The boy didn't have a left foot, only a metal replacement, and the dragon she wanted had a tail which needed moving, and the stirrup only matched his foot.

But not this one. She peered at it. The foot size was fairly large, but she'd fit in. It looked old, like it hadn't been used much. She touched it again, the leather a tad brittle, butâ€¦ with her workmen at Herkja, they could make a second quite easily.

She'd observed his stirrup when he flew her out that day, and at training. She'd almost memorized the rigging by now, in her fascination with the ingenious contraption. It would work, she told herself, unhooking the stirrup from the latch, an ugly indentation of the metal peg formed on the leather hook from which it hung. She'd have to watch Hiccup take the rigging off Toothless, when he comes home from that Induction Day practice.

She hooked up the stirrup again, slid down on the grass and waited. There was something strange with the sky, the drifting flecks of dust and ash. She'd experienced this before on Herkja, seeing how the island was a volcano itself. She watched a speck of gray drift by her vision. She put out a hand, caught the fleck in her palm, grasped it and held it there. It felt warm in her hand, cozy and warm. She inhaled carefully. "Think about your father," she whispered to herself, "and don't be afraid."

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She rose, tentatively, quietly, the swish of the blankets off of her hushed and gentle. She barely even wanted to breath, and her eyes were locked open. At last Toothless was asleep. Comfortable enough, thanks to Hiccup, to stay asleep while she was here. She watched the black shape's form breathing steadily on the block of stone, the scales glinting like obsidian in the moonlight streaming from the window. She inhaled quietly, listened at the silence and the quiet beat of Stoick's snoring down below. She slipped the sword from under her pillow, looked at its curved and shimmering case. She unsheathed it, watched the blue light play off the blade.

In all her eighteen years, she'd never killed a man in cold blood before. Only once, as the man was attacking her, on one of the less fortunate raiding expeditions they had in the past few months. But only once. Neither did she have the reason she had now to do so. So she told herself.

She inhaled again, and for a moment she imagined that her breathing was as loud as cracking icicles on the eaves. She blinked and slanted

her eyes at the boy on the bed to her left. She rose, took the sword, and reached under her pillow again for the note, the note she'd written three days before, on the ship with her father. She opened the paper and read the words again. She hadn't wanted to be explicit. Stoick would figure it out anyway.

"Okay," she breathed quietly and stepped forward, grasping the sword tightly. The moonlight cast an unreal glow over the room, and shed a shaft of gentle light on the sleeping kid in the middle of it, with drifts of that ash floating around her, like enchanted dust in an unreal world. She reached the edge of the bed. The boy's arms were on either side of him, resting on top of the wool, his head to one side, eyes shut, and his legs, only one of them ending in a sloping single peak at the foot of the bed. The thin blanket seemed so intrusive suddenly, like it was a shield on him.

She placed the sword in front of her. It would be quick and painless. Quick and quiet. She'd done it with animals before, so this- She took a breath. -this would, _should_be no problem. She closed her eyes.

Suddenly the kid moaned. She jolted, shot her eyes open. But he wasn't awake, wasn't looking at her. Her mouth went dry with relief. He was still asleep, the big round eyes were still closed, but they were, wereâ€|

He moaned again, opened his mouth and mumbled something. She could have sworn it was the dragon's name. _Toothless._ "Take this out on me, Dad, just don'tâ€|" He fell quiet again, heaved an uneven breath.

She backed away slightly, and she suddenly realized the sword in her hand. No, it couldn't be happening. She was unnerved. _Unnerved,_ she repeated in her mind. She stepped up to the boy again, close enough to could hear his heartbeat. She watched the eyes, the face, the delicate strain of pain in them, pain from some faraway memory locked in his head. She watched it, her mind suddenly emptying, just watching him, the small rise and fall of his chest to his breathing, the twitch in his fingers, the flicker of his eyes under the closed lids. She didn't know how long she stood there, just watching him. She turned around suddenly, sat on the the edge of her bed. She had to compose herself, try again one more time before the night was through. She drew her finger over the edge of her sword, the blade by her side. One more time.

:: ::

He awoke with a jolt suddenly, gasping. The voice, his voice, still reverberated in his head. _No, Dad, don't hurt him._ His fingers found their way around his blanket, and he swallowed tightly. It's just a dream, justâ€| _Your tribe, your best friend._ He rose quickly out of bed, shook his head violently. "Get out of here," he whispered hoarsely. He exhaled, gave himself a pause, just breathed.

He stiffened suddenly, sensing someone watching him. He turned sharply to his right. Her eyes were so large and alert there, locked on him. He blinked. "Uhâ€|hi."

She didn't answer back.

He cleared his throat. "Did I get you up?"

She was silent still, for a moment, then her composure softened and she looked at Toothless, the dragon sleeping soundly on the slab of rock, the quiet heave of his breathing audible in the quiet night. She looked at him. "I need to talk with you," she said, a strange hesitancy in her voice.

"Me?" She seemed almost troubled. "What is it?" he whispered, so as not to wake Toothless.

A slant of blue light shafted across her face from the window above his head, revealed her round face, the thin brows, curved gently in concern. She looked up at the window, down at Toothless again. "I, uh, need to show you somethingâ€¦" She rose, "â€¦at the Great Hall."

The Great Hall? "Why?"

She walked softly past Toothless, turned briefly at the foot of his bed. "Pleaseâ€¦ Hiccup." Her soft black hair swept low across her shoulder, glinting faintly in the shaft of blue light. She put a hand on the post of his bed, opened her mouth unsurely, looked away from him, her brows getting tighter together, before she exhaled gently and eased them flat.

Hiccup swallowed. "Are you okay?" She sure didn't look it. He leaned up and swung his good foot over the side of the bed, carefully brought his prosthetic down on the wooden floor.

"No, I- I guess not." Her voice was small, very small, but the last word sparked with something almostâ€¦ what was it? It was hard to place, in such a small whisper. Impatience? Anger? "Umm," he started, getting close to her and whispering, not wanting to wake up Toothless. "Maybe I can help?"

She put a hand on her forehead, looked down at the floor, shivered lightly.

"Uhhâ€¦" He brought a hand up cautiously, patted her back. "Everything's gonna be okay, I guessâ€¦"

She inhaled briskly, let out the breath with a sigh. Her shivering stopped. "I can do this," she whispered, barely audible, the words broken and brittle from her lips. She looked up, turned quickly and looked at Toothless behind her. "He finally went to sleep, didn't he?" she said, quietly, with a faint smile.

Hiccup looked at Toothless, sleeping there, pleasantly, the soft glow of his scales like sparkles of water in the sheen of light. One of his ear flaps shivered suddenly, as if he were sensing something in his slumber. "I slept outside with him once, you know," he rambled suddenly, remembering that time he woke up with dragon wings for his blanket. He smiled, glad she could see the simple beauty in his friend. He looked at her but she avoided his eyes, stepped around him, and told him to follow her to the Hall. "We won't be long," she hummed.

He inhaled, stepped down the stairs after her, looked back at Toothless. The dragon nudged his head in his little feet, hummed

pleasant sleeping noises.

:: ::

She was quiet, very quiet on the walk over to the Great Hall, up the stone steps, the thin film of rain and ash floating down on them. He grimaced up at the sky, thought he heard thunder out somewhere. The stuff was getting sticky at this point, and as he reached the last half of the steps, he swore the rain was getting heavier.

She opened the door for him, and he sprinted in. "Man, is that rain getting heavy," he laughed, rubbing his hair and slapping the murky droplets from his fingers. A peal of thunder rolled as he heard her step in and close the door behind her. He rubbed his arm inadvertently, turned back to see her let go of the door, let it fall almost into place, the wide wooden planks never landing snugly into the frame. She seemed so quiet, and she lingered by the door for a moment.

"Hey, Heather?" He walked over to her, quietly, cleared his throat. "What, uh, did you want to show me?"

He watched her inhale deeply, her back rising and falling with the length of the breath. She whirled suddenly around to face him, and he caught a momentary vision of dark black eyes, livid suddenly and cold, before he felt her push into him, hands suddenly on his torso, pushing him, slapping him, down onto the stone floor of the Hall. His head hit the stone and he grunted. "Hey, what are you-" He looked up at her, couldn't understand what was going on. He tried to get to his feet, but she kicked him down again, hissing something he couldn't hear.

"Heather, what are you _doing?_" he gasped, scooting away again, back snapping suddenly against the fire pit walls. She jumped, threw a foot into his hip, making him buckle over to the side. He clamored up, something grabbed the back of his fur vest, his heart raced over a beat. She threw him on the ground, and he flinched, the hard stone smacking into his bones. He whirled to face her, tried to scoot away again, but she threw herself down on him, suddenly, grabbed the string ties of his tunic, lurched him upward violently. He gasped, grabbed the hand that held him and pushed, tried to pull it off. Those eyes looked at him suddenly, hot and angry now, in the heat of the fight, furious and livid, all the passions she kept inside now pouring out in a wave of vengeance. "Heather-" he gasped, tried desperately to- She lunged her hand aside suddenly, slapping his right hand and arm onto the stone floor. Her right hand flashed towards her waist, emerged with a shimmering metal, a curved blade that twinkled in the faint moonlight. Hiccup let the other hand go, latched onto the weaponed arm. "What- why are you-" he gasped, tried to find some explanation in her eyes.

"Trying- to" she breathed, fighting against his hand on her, "kill-you." She pushed his arm down, stepped on it with the foot of her bent leg. "Aaargh," he hissed, the pressure making his fingers, his teeth clench. _Why?_

Why?

He tried to gasp out something, but words weren't going to do anything right now. She brought the sword up suddenly, latched a hand

into his tunic again, twisting the fabric into her fingers. He got his left hand out, pushed her leg, rolled himself to his left. She clawed him again, a hand clasp the back of his tunic and forcing him on his back again. She straddled him, knees on his arms, slapped the fist of her sword hand on his neck, pushing up his chin, the blade cool and brushing his shoulder. He gasped for air, felt the other hand finger his chest again. "Why are you doing this-" he gasped, tensely, the words small and squeaked. A chilled throb ran through his heart. The hand let up the pressure on his throat and he jerked his left leg up, hit her from behind. She lurched forward, her one hand jabbing down into his chest for support, the other fist digging into his throat. His vision wavered suddenly, and he jabbed again, his knees hitting something. She whirled, let up her hands, and he gasped desperately for air. His throat hurt and quivered, trying to recover. He couldn't close his eyes, stared at her, the sword coming down suddenly from above someplace. "_No_" he gasped and tried desperately to roll, somewhere, anywhere, to his right, and then-

White hot, burning, stunned. A pressing sensation in his throat as something loud and desperate tried to force its way out, the choking feeling as it justâ€¦ couldn't. That white fire in his shoulder, his left side - his vision sparked of white suddenly, and he blinked, felt himself trying to breath, failing. Another pressure left him suddenly, the one on his arms, and he felt his arms go limp in the freedom. His head rolled to the left vaguely and he inhaled. It was black all around, a swash of blue light far away, golden glow somewhere in the image, and the color, black, he saw black, but he knew it was red. He breathed finally, gasped, his lips shaking. He felt something again, hard to distinguish from the shards of fire pumping through him, soft fingers on his chest, a rustling thing, dry and thin, pushed into his collar, resting at the base of his neck.

He couldn't even see her, he blinked, but somehow his vision failed him. He felt the steps, as they moved from him, and the wash of light and the creak, and then everything went quiet and black, blue and orange, and quiet.

:: ::

Toothless flicked his tail, peered open one eye towards Hiccup's bed. He knew it - the boy was gone. He had heard a slight pattering through his dream, flying, Hiccup striking the stirrup high and then diving into the clouds below. He hadn't wanted to leave it, but something in the air, the feeling of the pattering. He could always sense Hiccup's mood in the pattern of the metal footfalls. Concern this time. Toothless shook his head over the thick slab of stone, spied Heather's bed. Empty, the blankets thrown neatly aside. His mind jolted awake. Both, gone. He didn't hear them downstairs, either.

He crept over the edge, down the stairs. Carefully laid his claws on the wood. An easy, breathing snoring assured him Hiccup's father didn't hear. He slipped to the door, nudged it open, leapt quietly into the drizzly rain and slipped on the trail leading down to the plaza. Sticky droplets, droplets mixed with ash under a brooding, moonless sky. Dark fragments of cloud below the main cloud ceiling, drifting by the sea. Glinting pools, quiet droplets singing, coating every surface with stickiness. But no sign of Hiccup.

He neared his snout to the ground, wrinkled his nose as no familiar scent presented itself. The rain. It's been washed away. He shook his body, vibrated his wings as the sticky coating itched him and filmed over his scales. The boy wouldn't just wander out into the night, not unless they'd go flying. This wasn't that kind of night.

The blacksmith shop lay right ahead, its eaves glistening in the drizzle. If anywhere, Hiccup would be there. But there was no light. Toothless turned left towards a house, a new scent wafting in that direction. That scent . . . his head jerked backwards, his eyes widening and his nostrils flaring. Blood. Not human.

The smell intoxicated his senses, sent his body trembling in horror and some primeval excitement. He licked his teeth, then vigorously shook his head. _Stop it._ He yelped at himself suddenly, forcibly standing still. _This is not prey._

It's dragon blood.

He leapt towards the scent, towards the dark house, turned behind it. Upon the wet grass of the cliff edge lay a silent form of multicolored speckles - a Monstrous Nightmare, still curled in sleep. Crownfire.

Crownfire, wake up. Toothless edged close to his head, nudged the jaws. Limp. Cold. No gentle heaving breath. He yapped into his ears, his eyes searching over the motionless body. No cuts, not even bruises. The chest. He stuck his snout close to the Nightmare's scaled skin. The smell of blood overwhelmed him - he withdrew his head, lest he go crazy. A thick stream of black fluid was glistening down the Nightmare's chest. He backed away from the body. A wound to the heart.

Dead.

He jerked his head up, riveted his eyes to the back of the next house over. Another dragon, a brown Nadder, lying perfectly still, sleeping without a sound. But her back - it didn't heave with her breathing.

Suddenly a jabbing pain hit him in the chest. Shot into his heart, his wings, his legs, his head. A strangled yelp escaped him. He lashed out his tail at whatever it was, but only hit air. The flash of pain vanished. As he heaved breath, he knew his chest was fine, it wasn't real. No new scent of blood entered the air, and not a grass blade stirred except from his swishing tail. No one, absolutely no one, was here. His mind flashed. He'd had these pains before, had sudden pains when he was alone. Always later, he'd find Hiccup, bruised from falling, cut from some blacksmithing. But this pain was nothing like those.

Hiccup!

He growled, jerked backwards, cutting back from the confined corner behind the house, his breaths racing and his eyes scanning everywhere at once. He leapt out from behind the house, skidding on the plaza, his thoughts and his throat screaming as one.

Hiccup!

His eyes caught a quick movement by the Great Hall. A slim dark figure. He dashed towards it. Not Hiccup. Heather. His pace sagged instinctively, then set in purpose. She can help. He raced towards her, noticed her little head shaking slightly, her back heaving, her hand pushing into her face. Hot eyes, but wet streaks under them. Those eyes bulged wide open as he approached her.

A gurgled hum rose from his throat as he reached her, nudged his face into hers, lifting her head up. He never liked her, had a bad instinct about her, a double-sidedness he loathed, but the tears. Honest tears. _Why you're crying? We don't have time for this._ He throated, hummed, looked into her eyes. Those dark eyes gazed back into his, so wide-eyed they were almost perfectly round orbs. Her throat choked, her voice sucking at her breath savagely. "Half of it's over," she muttered, repeated. Her little hand stroked the side of his head. "Toothless, I - I'm glad you're here. I need a friend."

He wrinkled his nose, stared at her, disturbed by her strange emotion. _What are you talking about?_ She was clearly distressed and consumed in her own problems. He hated to force the issue, and he'd much prefer being with somebody else, but she was the nearest human to help him. He yelped at her, trying to make her understand. _Something's happening out here. Hiccup's hurt - can't you feel it? I need to find him!_ A faint smell in her clothing sparked his senses - too faint, disturbingly faint. The sticky rain falling, making it fainter every moment. He shook his head. No time to waste. He started moving away from her, but her hand touched him suddenly, got his head whirling back to face her. "Toothless, don't go." Her eyes were desperate. Then something crept in them, something narrow that confused him. Her voice steadied. "Hiccup's been captured. He's hurt, he's been taken to the ships. I tried, but-" Her hand waved vaguely out to sea.

What? His eyes tried to decipher where her finger was pointing. He stared back at the girl, not quite sure if this wasn't some incoherent idea from her distress. Wait. Maybe _that's_ why she's upset.

Then let's not stand around! He haunched his legs to take off, but halted in mid-motion. He flapped his tail, turned his head, looked at her.

Heather's eyes were unblinking, just staring at him, unbelieving.

He hit his tail again on the plaza stone. _Please._

"You really can hear me," she whispered. Her demeanor changed, a sure spark in her legs as she sprinted towards Hiccup's house. "Follow me." Toothless bolted after her, skidded as she halted at the side overhang of the house, held still as she grabbed the saddle and old stirrup hanging there and latched the leather straps and saddle tightly around his body. He was breathing fast; she was breathing fast. He could smell sheets of sweat over her body, her face, feel her tense legs as she lifted herself over him, feel her tense body as it settled into the saddle, feel her tense hands as she grabbed the handle touching the scales of his neck. Suddenly he realized his own body was shivering, trembling, hesitating, as her feet slipped into the stirrups.

Could she fly him? She'd sat on his back all morning. He could feel her observing him, observing the stirrup and Hiccup's motions. But riding him alone?

Don't hesitate. Hiccup's depending on me. He spread his wings, bunched his hind legs under him, shot himself into the raining black sky. The stirrup flicked with his beating wings as he climbed over the sea.

:: ::

Slowly, the realization dawned on him. _I'm bleeding to death right now._ He closed his eyes, tried to ignore the pain a moment.

I'm not, notâ€¦ not to death.

Toothless. He tried to say it through his clenched teeth. "Toothless?" he gasped, and the effort almost made him scream, the white torture in his arm. If the dragon was outside, he would feel it, Toothless could always feel his pain, know if he needed help.

But Toothless didn't come. He groaned, let out an exasperated breath. "Astrid," he said, too small to be heard. _Dad?_ They wouldn't be around, no. He closed his eyes, tried to think of the possibility of getting to his feet and- _argh._ The arm spasmed again, clenching him. The warm red river ebbed again, and his vision wavered suddenly as he brought his good arm up, over his chest, to touch the viscous flow. Something papery met the skin of his hands and he paused, inhaled, the process of thinking almost too much. The thing she put on himâ€¦ His fingers grappled the paper- it _was_ paper. He looked at it, gasped again as some squeezing sensation hit his arm, clenched his fist and heard the white blur in his ears. He wanted to scream, and then it passed, the pain consistent now, pressing itself into him, thick and constant. He inhaled, breathed, tried to make it steady.

He brought his right hand up, watched the moonlight fall through the paper, making the words hard to read. The paper crinkled in his hand and he gasped a breath, felt a fresh flow of warmth cover him, brought the paper low so he could see it, this paper, this death note.

"Stoick," it read, in a shaky handwriting, "you should have killed him when you had the chance."

His hand dropped limp onto his chest. He inhaled a pained breath, tried to make conscious words to express his own confusion. He looked out at the moonlight, the sky outside now wholly black and evil, the dusty rain heavy and slow now, dreary, pelting down, down, down onto the stone steps, flicking on the rocks, quiet, constant, almost peaceful. "Dad," he hissed, "what's going on?" A spasm hit him suddenly and he gasped a scream, shut his eyes tight.

13. Chapter 11: Dawn of Battle

a/n: Welcome to Act II, my friends! We spent all night Monday and into Tuesday morning (it's 5 AM now XD) making this thing (mostly the

illustration). Hope you like it!

View the illustration at the official webpage. Put a period where the dashes are: [howtotrainyourdragon2 - thecomicseries - com](http://howtotrainyourdragon2-thecomicseries.com)
>or at my deviantArt gallery: [inhonoredglory - deviantart - gallery - 38855965](http://inhonoredglory-deviantart-gallery-38855965)<p>

* * *

><p>How to Train Your Dragon II
>The Dragon Whisperer

**Act II
>A World Shattered
**

**Chapter 11
>Dawn of Battle
**

It couldn't be that long. He thought for a moment he'd drifted out of consciousness - but just a moment. He exhaled, opened his eyes again, something hot and wet under his lids. Sweat soaked through his cheeks and chest, a clamminess he could barely stand. He tried to see the outside through the crack in the door. The darkness was leaving now, just leaving, a dull gray emerging in the light, the wash of rain still faintly falling, clapping on the steps outside the Hall. If it was morning, they had to be coming, someone had- The pain came crashing back and he gasped, felt his heart heaving, pumping faster, racing in his chest. He had to look at it, he had to see the damage.

He gulped carefully, turned his head to the left, looked. Calmly, looked. The thin sword was still there, just below his shoulder, under his tunic, sticking up through his vest, the fur discolored and soaked now, pinches of fabric stuck together in blacker strands, his sleeve stained and the stones under him glistening with wet reflections. He was nauseous suddenly and he turned away, clenching his teeth. He couldn't feel his hands anymore, didn't want to think why. Maybe the loss of so much blood, maybe the pain, maybe. . .

He leaned his head up slightly, saw the light come brighter through the door. Someone had to find him, someone. . . He heard a light murmur outside suddenly, like people, dragons? He couldn't be sure. Something misty was pushing into his head now, and he started feeling lightheaded. A rush of nerves hit him, shaking him. His heart seemed to speed up faster and he closed his eyes, breathed, winced, tried to calm . . . anything, everything.

The sounds were increasing, and he was sure it was a dragon. The mist in his mind buzzed in his ears. It sounded like distress out there. He pushed the thought into his head - distress, dragons. He had to get out there. Had to, had. . . He tried to feel his right arm, moved it, the fingers still grasping that paper, that note. He fisted the stone floor, let the paper go, got leverage, inhaled, opened wide his eyes and lifted himself, steady. The rush of something white and forceful flowed up into his head, a silent screaming rush of color behind his eyes. Nauseous. Steady. He inhaled, gasped a little when something warm and murky flowed onto his left hand. He didn't want to look, just felt the back of his hand get warm and wet. He looked to the right, to the door, the opening, the crashing sound of something out there, in trouble, dragons screaming, wingbeats. He

blinked, and a waft of focus sparked in him.

He had a feeling he wasn't going to be this alert for long. Move, _now_, while you can. He slid along the floor, clawing the cold stone, the screech of his prosthetic suddenly annoying and loud in his ears. He didn't care that he was making a muddy red trail up to the door, that he was covered in the stuff, wet and gasping around him. His left shoulder throbbed with a passion, threatened to force him into a tight and vicious curl on the floor. He gritted his teeth, felt some kind of steam misting over him, a moisture growing, dripping, from his chin. He reached the door, slapped his body against the closed one, gasping for breath, the rush of white hitting him again, draining him of feeling. He opened his eyes, ignored the watery vision, the dizziness, put out his right hand, his fist into the open air between the doors, the back of his hand on the outside of that almost open door, pushed_, pushed_-

Door, just open for me.

His hand dropped to the stone. He gasped, too tired, too weak, too much, _pain_. The muddled white buzz in his head. He slapped his right hand against the bottom of the door again, grunted and gasped, got the thing to creak wider, the swing taking on its own speed, falling away from him. He looked up, out the door, the rain misting now, the sky a mix of gray clouds and open patches of brighter sky.

And the dragons.

Through the buzz in his head, he heard screams, pained, awful screams. He leaned forward, winced hotly, his left hand dragging on the stone, his arm throbbing, his shoulder eating him, devouring his nerves. That sword was still stuck in him. He thought he saw someone out there, people, running down there in the plaza, he couldn't see anymore, the wet mist in his eyes, the clamminess in his hair, the quick, small breaths that hissed out of him, the cold stone, the warm blood.

"Help," he gasped, barely audible to himself, couldn't even see what was going on outside, the wash, the great river of pain swallowing him, snatching his breath, pushing into his throat and up his head. He pushed one more time, out the door, slipped, fell, his cheek on the cold rock suddenly, the hot mist around his face, the wet warmth crawling up his neck, the sword hitting the ground, sliding somehow, the blade twisting around inside of him. His eyes shot open and something thin and sharp gasped out of him. He turned on his back, breathless, waves of white and red and black clouding his vision. The sounds and screams of dragons behind him, somewhere. Voices, people.

Toothless.

Where was he?

:: ::

His wings pounded the dank air in the near-vertical ascent, his mind screaming at him to move, _move_. There wasn't enough time.

The stirrup flicked suddenly, tentatively, _not deep enough_. He

forced his wings lower, into a more level flight path as he careened through the blasting droplets of the low clouds. The edge of his wings sliced through the thick, sticky mist, coating his scales. He narrowed his eyes, grunted as the pressure from the stirrup wavered erratically, his tail opening and closing and making him zigzag over the murky sea. He skimmed the waves, thrust his wings up to prevent a crash into the whitecaps. The girl didn't know the first thing about flying, he hissed inside. He squealed at her, but she wasn't Hiccup, wouldn't get it probably. Her legs were tight against his sides, thumping his scales, urging him faster. He accelerated as best he could, feeling her body sleek down against his as they climbed back into the heart of the low clouds.

Toothless muttered in a gravel tone as the blinding cloud fragments parted to reveal myriad black silhouettes of the Skirra Vel ships fast approaching across the dark expanse. She'd better know what ship he's on, _because I can't waste time looking_. He scanned the hulls below the quiet sails, lowered his front legs and curled his toes, ready to snatch Hiccup to safety the moment he spied him among the big, shifting bodies of the Skirra Vel. The people below were active, a strange sort of active that only spelled one thing. Barrels and catapults on the deck, people lowering catapults, setting stones in them. . .

He suddenly glanced back at his rider. Heather, furrowing deep her brows, only the stains of her tears remaining on her face now, her piercing eyes scanning the ships. Her ships. She said Hiccup was captured and taken to the ships, but these were _her_ ships. What side did that put her on? He tore his glance away, concentrated on the patch of clearing sky ahead, sky beginning to blush with the first pink swaths of dawn. Bad vibes sparked inside of him. He suddenly abhorred the notion of her being his rider, her being the one to keep him flying. Maybe he misunderstood her, back there before she rode him. Maybe he was too quick, too impatient to get to Hiccup, too in a hurry. He hissed a dragon's curse. He could smell it now, the deception in her, the lilt in her arm, felt like triumph. Triumph. He roared out, flapped his wings, didn't understand the things he was feeling from her. But she flicked the stirrup suddenly, sent him rolling down, low, towards a ship. They were landing. He opened out his wings, didn't want to crash, eased, tried to get the wind to coordinate with them.

He thumped on the surface, suddenly felt a spark of fear run through him, that old feeling on ships, _ships_. Ever since Hiccup's father put him in one, and the bands, the leather straps on him. He lisped a squeal, suddenly distracted by a sudden flash of axe heads towards his head.

"_NO!_" yelled the girl on his back, and the man with the weapon stepped back. Others, from that odd group of strangers that had come to Berk recently, they were here, brandishing weapons, staring at him, mingling his mind. The ship, he was getting claustrophobic suddenly, the girl stepping off of him, he tried to pay attention, the madness under his scales tickling up inside him and throwing back all sorts of old memories.

Hiccup.

Think of Hiccup.

He had to focus. The girl was calming the people, putting her hands out, speaking in soft, low tones. He tried to take a moment to compose himself, tell himself this wasn't the same as before. _That never worked before_. It was only Hiccup's ship he could stand at all. Hiccup. He tried to replay in his mind the things the boy said when he tried to comfort him, the little voice that was soft and gentle to him, stroking him, smiling at him. He closed his eyes a moment, let the vision calm him, the roll of the boat soothe him, the hard wooden planks under him. Don't let the past get to you.

Suddenly there was a hand on his head, a soft hand, Heather's scent. She was scratching under his chin, making his mind loll suddenly, waver in a watery sort of sleep, but _no._ He didn't want to sleep right now. He lashed out from her hand, growled. How did she know about this? Of course, the training. Hiccup had told them everything, they asked for everything, and blast it, none of them had figured it out. She got her hand on him again, scratched the special spot. He jerked, she held. These people were bad, he had no doubt now. Bad. Her fingers dug into the area, numbing his nerves. So what did that mean for, for . . . He had to find him . . . had to. . . The fingers caressed him swiftly, smoothly, right in the spot, that spot he only let Hiccup finger. And at that, only in play.

There was deception in this, some wicked, awful deception, he could feel it. He heard a gruff voice somewhere as an irresistible sleep overcame him, a voice so familiar, what was it? Like Hiccup's father, Hiccup. What was that? The boy's name.

". . . Hiccup. . ."

And she scratched one more time, and he cursed his natural functions, to make him weak like this. His mind slowly, firmly closed out on him.

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Stormfly.

She knew it the instant the squawking scream came through her ears. Her eyes opened and she jolted her head from the pillow. What was wrong? She threw the blankets off of her, planted her feet on the floor.

The scream again, with more this time, other dragons. Squeaks and growls and- human voices, screaming. Buff, heavy voices, the spark and plunge of weapons. Something terrible was going on. She pounded to the window. "Mom! Dad!" she screamed, threw open the window.

The Nadder was throwing a vicious flame at a fat shape of a man. He threw his long, glinting axe towards the dragon, missing deftly as the Nadder jolted to the side. "Stormfly-" she gasped. There were other dragons, over at other houses, screaming, flapping, spraying fire over the plaza, and men- They almost looked familiar, the clothing, the necklaces of dragon scales, the clang of all that decoration on their dark and dirty clothing. They were mad, angry, in their hands long blades of swords and axes, stark maroon and glistening. Blood. She gasped, whirled backwards, slapped a hand on her bed post, swung over to the head of her bed, grabbed the axe from under her pillow.

"_Dad!_" she screamed and jumped back to the window, threw a leg over and yelled. "You get _away_ from that dragon." She jumped out of the window and ran forward, whipped the axe up to him. Stormfly hummed, throatied a sharp and loud growl at the man - a Skirra Vellite, she realized. The man whirled to face her, the dark, gruff look on his face changing from determination to fear as Stormfly closed in on him, the dragon gathering the gas in her throat, opening her jaws, inhaling-

Something crashed to their right, a hard heavy crash afar off and the man ahead of her whirled, ran towards it, calling, yelling, Stormfly letting out her fire on the ground, the stone ahead of her. She heard people all around humming, the chatter of weapons clanging on each other, and then the forms, the dark heavy forms of dragons, on the ground, motionless, other dragons nudging them, wailing, hissing fire and screaming. Her mother, at her side suddenly, gasped and brought a hand to her mouth. "They've killed them," she breathed and ran forward. Her father chased after her, yelling back at Astrid to get safe somewhere, "The Great Hall!" he screamed and left, the two of them spanning over the scene, mingling with the other villagers, the other warriors, all rising up out of their beds, running out the doors, calling out in a clatter of sounds at once mad and knowing, confused and fearful. Astrid stepped back, jumped on Stormfly quickly, swept low through the houses, not intending to sit quietly in hiding, but not knowing what she was looking for. She glanced at dragons, scores of them, lying dead on the ground by their homes. Nightmares, Nadders, a Gronckle, two Gronckles, baby Terrors in a small and lifeless heap. She heaved out an unbelieving gasp. How could they? Why-?

That sound, the one which startled the Skirra Vellite she saw first - she guessed now it was a ship, a ship crashing into the docks. Because now, more of the enemy was clamoring up from the edge of the village, Skirra Vellites looking harried, almost worried, desperate, like something went out of plan. She tightened a grip on the handle of her axe. This was war.

Where was Stoick?

No, where was _Hiccup?_ She got the horrifying vision he wasn't safe, the thin wisp of a kid he was, and hand-to-hand battle like this. . . The dragons on the ground in front, around her. She was looking for a black one suddenly. Where was Toothless?

She flew over to the main plaza, landed Stormfly and raced up to the steps of the Haddock house, stopped at the base of the stone steps as a colorful Nightmare flashed by her, Spitelout on his back. He screamed down something to her, hot and warning, flapped the dragon to the right, towards the ocean, the shore, the ships. Was the whole Skirra Vellite army attacking? People were everywhere, her parents, where were they? Someone was shouting, everyone was shouting. Dragons were roaring, crawling up the rooftops flying, some trying to fly, others screaming at the base of motionless bodies. She shivered. Something bumped into her suddenly, and she whirled, saw Stoick there in front of her, a gasping harried shock on his bristled face. "Where's Hiccup?" he gasped, eyes darting over the torrid of noise in the plaza.

"Hiccup?"

"He's not inside, neither is Heather."

This wasn't the time for jealousy anymore. She stepped around him, looked at the little overhang on the right side of the house where Hiccup kept the stirrup. Even from here she could tell it was empty. She cursed. "Toothless is gone, maybe he took him somewhere."

Stoick listened to her words, huffed and pounded away, booming something loud, calling individuals together, his chieftainship in overdrive. A blast of dragon fire filled the air, and she whirled, saw a funnel of arrows shoot upward into the air from something on the water. The dragons flapping wide and fast above them, no Toothless, no Hiccup. Where was he? And the kids, she had to check on them. Fishlegs, oh Odin's ghost, if Meatlug had died. . .

She raced back to Stormfly, threw her legs over her, and flapped quickly to the twins' house, Snotlout's nearby. The twins were on foot, just outside the threshold, long spears in their hands. Their home was nestled closer to the center of the town, safe at least for now from the brunt of the flames and the close battle on the edges of the village.

"Is your dragon okay?" Astrid screamed, flapping in a hover just over them.

"We haven't seen him," Ruffnut screamed back and Astrid swept low, landed.

"Which sucks, we need to snuff these thugs." Tuffnut's voice was hot and laced with anger. He grabbed his sister, headed someplace. Astrid jumped off Stormfly, kept her axe firmly gripped in her hand, jumped quickly towards them. "We need another dragon," Tuff spat.

Ruffnut held back, looked at Astrid. "Did you see what they did to the dragons?" Her eyes were big.

"Killed them, I know." She flinched.

"Not all of them."

"What are you waiting for?" Tuffnut stomped forward, the scream of dragons at war getting louder all around, above them.

"Wait-" Astrid grabbed his arm. "You seen Hiccup?"

"Hiccup's missing?"

"He's not at home. Neither's Toothless."

"Well, _I_ don't know where the kid's gone."

Snotlout came up suddenly, from behind his house somewhere, a hammer in his hand. "Where's Hookfang?" He sounded desperate.

Astrid sharply sighed. "_I don't know_." She flicked her axe around, ducked as a colorful Nadder suddenly started spitting fire into the air, her rider lashing insults at her, frustrated. The dragon was going crazy. She looked at Snotlout. "You have to know where Hiccup is," she gasped, desperate suddenly. She couldn't stand the thought

of him alone, not with war in the air.

Snotlout mumbled. "Naw, no, I- I don't. I need to find Hookfang."

Astrid snapped her axe, knew the more she talked about it, thought about it, the more she thought something bad had happened. Hiccup wasn't out traipsing in the woods in the early morning, and he certainly wasn't sending plasma fireballs at these invaders. A Night Fury's fire could easily be heard, and she was not hearing it today.

A round fat shape came spinning by suddenly, Meatlug flying up there, Fishlegs looking down to them. "Fishlegs!" she screamed up at him. The kids looked up. He was pointing, his little chubby arm shaking desperately, motioning towards the Great Hall.

"What is it?" she shouted.

Fishlegs mumbled something, gasped out a little scream. "Hiccup-" he squeaked, "we got to help him."

A fear ran through her, like she was expecting something horrible. She clenched her axe, raced up to Stormfly, jumped on, kicked the dragon's sides and soared, got the Hall in view at last. And there, on the top steps - a small, motionless shape, the little smudge of a shape. He was laying there, splayed out, motionless. She inhaled suddenly, sharply. "_Hiccup_" she gasped. Stormfly sensed her panic, pounded down midway up the steps. She lurched forward on her, scrambled off, still holding her axe, landed on the steps, saw the kids afar coming up towards the Hall, on foot. She turned, ran up the stairs, impatient, two, three at a time. Meatlug was there, landing on the steps, and she passed him. "Hiccup's hurt-" gasped the small, squeaked voice of Fishlegs. She didn't turn to look, just pounded her boots up the steps, hot and hurried, threw one leg up, the next. She saw him up there, he looked so small and frail, so. . . "Hiccup!" She reached the top steps, the kids were still far down the steps, not. . . here. . . yet. . .

Her axe fell suddenly.

"Hiccup."

His pale face stared up at her, he was gasping, short quick breaths, shivering, and the blood, it was everywhere. The thin sword, the knife, whatever it was - sticking out of him, just under his shoulder. . . She lunged down, sat on her bent legs, didn't know what to touch, what to do, her knees sliding on the red pool under him. He mouthed something at her, her name, closed his eyes, opened them with sticky trails of tears flowing under them. His chest heaved down suddenly and he gasped, choked. She couldn't find her voice, and he grew paler suddenly, his lips blue and chapped. He gasped something, hard to hear. She thought fast, had to think fast, put a hand carefully on his body. "It's going to be okay, Hiccup, just- just keep breathing, okay?"

He inhaled sharply, hissed through his teeth. "I'm gonna- Astrid, I-" His voice cracked, and his chest shivered rapidly under her palm. Her nerves sparked and his eyes dilated suddenly, the color in his face wavering. "I lost so much. . ." he whispered, hoarsely, making some

awful pained noise, the fingers of his left hand crawling up to her, brushed by her kneeling leg. "I-" He let out a long breath suddenly, went limp. His eyes flicked shut.

"Hiccup-"

His head rolled to the side and his chest heaved down.

"No, _no_." She moved her hand to his face, her movements gaining speed. "Hiccup, stay with me." She clenched her teeth, looked up, saw the dragons still skirting over the sky, arrows flying out from the ocean, voices, big and heavy, confused voices everywhere, people running, fire, houses on fire, ships on fire, the hundreds of Skirra Vellite ships reaching out, spreading out on the ocean, towards the horizon, schools of dragons hovering over them, like a mass of insects over the textured islands of a massive fleet.

The kids were almost here. _Almost, not yet. _They had to get moving, do _something_. "Hiccup's dying over here-" She slammed a fist against the stone step. "I need you _now_."

Snotlout picked up his pace, landed in front of her, his eyes stunned. Fishlegs was speechless, his little eyes wide and round, his lips shaking. Ruff and Tuff landed on either side of the two kids. Ruffnut gasped.

Her eyes latched down on the glinting metal, its violent shape, cutting into Hiccup, the red all around, staining him, his neck, arm, smears on his cheek. She couldn't stand that thing in him, willfully ignored the notion that such a horrible thing should stay in his small body. "We need to get this thing out," she gasped. "I need you to hold him down." She eyed Snotlout. He knelt down. "Wha- wha- what do I do?"

"Sure that's the right thing to do?" Fishleg's voice was impossibly small.

"Just listen to me!" she shouted.

Fishlegs flinched. "Then- then we need something to dull the pain."

Astrid looked up at him. "What?"

"You pull that out now, and-"

"Just hold it a minute, okay? I got it." Tuffnut flashed into the Hall and Astrid winced to hear his boot squish once into something thick and wet.

Snotlout gazed stunned at the sword curving out of Hiccup's shoulder. "Will he die?" he said starkly.

That dream. "_No_," she snapped, quickly. He won't die. She bent down, touched him, slid her hand over the stained, sticky top of his tunic, felt the warmth of life still there, the subtle shiver of his heart. _Can't die._

Tuffnut tumbled back, a mug in his hand, crashed onto Astrid's side, and grabbed Hiccup's head. Astrid shrieked. "Stop! I'll do that." She

slapped Tuffnut's arm away and took the mug. She brought the mug to his mouth and let the liquid slosh gently into his lips. Come on. Hiccup's eyes suddenly flickered and her heart heaved a thanks. His body jerked and he broke into a cough. Then it clicked. She eyed Tuffnut sharply. "What _is_ this stuff?"

"It was in the bar, what did you think?" He looked at her incredulously.

"Curse you, Tuffnut! Hiccup doesn't drink that stuff. It's gonna shock the living daylights out of him."

Hiccup gasped suddenly and began to squirm. Astrid laid a hand on him again. "Hiccup, you're going to be okay," she said, slowly, trying to impart some sort of calm in the madness, the panic inside of her notwithstanding.

Hiccup nodded tightly, lips white and thin.

"We just need to pull the sword out, you're going to be okay."

Something pained struck through his eyes, and he gulped air. Color washed over his face suddenly, wavering there. He was more alert now, awake. Astrid suddenly slapped Tuffnut. "Now look what you've done. Hiccup's awake now; he'll really feel it."

Hiccup writhed under her arms, desperation in his eyes. He tried to say something, stopped, and shut his eyes.

She brought the cup to his lips again. "Hiccup, you're gonna have to take this. It's going to hurt. This'll help some."

He peered open one eye, took the drink, and cringed. He hissed painfully through clenched teeth and fell back on the stone ground, breathing in huge gasping breaths that came out thin and shallow.

Astrid pushed the mug at Tuffnut and put her hands on Hiccup's arms. She eyed the sword, then Snotlout. "Do it."

Snotlout brought his hand over the blade, his face began to pale. His eyes widened. "No - no, I can't."

"This is no time to argue!"

Snotlout paled. "I, ah, I just feel a little--"

"Fine!" She grabbed Hiccup's arm with one hand and slapped a palm around the sword with the other.

Hiccup screamed.

Astrid threw the sword away, heard it clatter down the steps, and pushed her hand in the wound. Hiccup lashed under her, squeezed his eyes tight and gasped, his arms clawing the ground, his left hand fisting into something white and tense. "_Stop_," he hissed, desperately, turning his head back, his jaw locked in a voiceless scream.

Astrid let up, ever slightly, felt him ease, felt the blood throb out stronger. She pressed again, both hands this time. "I'm sorry, Hiccup," she choked.

He went pale again, whimpered something small and terribly desperate. Sharp streaks of pain shot up inside her, to see Hiccup like this. The kids were moving around behind her and Fishlegs lumbered down to her left suddenly, a thick roll of cloth in his hands. Tuffnut knelt down on the steps near Hiccup's head, reached behind his belt, slipped out his dagger, and brought it over Hiccup's left shoulder.

"What are you _doing?_" Astrid gasped.

He didn't look at her, moved in and grabbed the top of Hiccup's vest, forced it cut with the blade, dug his hands into the shoulder of Hiccup's stained tunic, pulled the dagger through, the threads ripping. "Get your hands off," Tuffnut spat at her, grabbing the roll from Fishlegs and throwing off the clothing from Hiccup's shoulder. Astrid let go, caught on suddenly. "Let me-"

"I got it, okay?" Tuffnut snapped, pushing up Hiccup's shoulder and flapping the cloth around. Hiccup hissed, turned his head away and shut his eyes. Astrid pressed a clean fabric into the wash of red on his skin, pulled back the ripped clothing and tightened the strips of material Tuffnut swung over at her. She put a hand on Hiccup's chest lightly, felt the rapid shiver of his heart, the sharp inhale as the fabric tightened. He leaned his head up, looked at her, some intent in his hot and tired eyes.

"What is it, Hiccup?" She leaned closer, stroked his other arm, tried to somehow do something to tell him she was there, there for him.

"Cold-" he whispered, "get me warm, okay, I-" His head slapped down again, and he hissed in a breath tensely. Astrid fumbled for words, got up and hurried into the Hall, didn't pause to look at the wash of maroon on the floor, ripped a wool banner from the corner and rushed back outside. A louder scream hit the air and she looked up, saw a hoard of dragons flocking over the edge of the village, wings mingling into each other, fire spitting out of them, and on the plaza, Hooligans in every direction. She thought she almost heard Stoick's voice in the madness. She looked down at Hiccup suddenly. "We got to get him inside- it's not safe out here."

Tuffnut looked up, his hands bloody. Fishlegs bent down carefully, put his right hand under Hiccup's neck, left under the base of his legs. She could feel Ruffnut swoosh behind her, sweep wider the Hall doors. Snotlout suddenly appeared, tentatively moving to the right side of Hiccup, opposite Fishlegs, his own face a little lost of color. "Need help, uh, Fishlegs?" he said, small.

"Thanks, but I, I think I'll be okay." Fishlegs' voice was hushed suddenly, as he gazed down at Hiccup's frail form between his big hands.

"Be careful," Astrid said, leaning down and laying the wool banner on Hiccup. He grasped the cloth tightly with his right hand, knuckles white and pale.

Fishlegs lifted Hiccup off the ground. Astrid put a hand under Hiccup's legs, alongside Fishleg's, could hear the sound of her own moan as Hiccup's head lolled down and his abdomen sank, without a strength or will of its own, between Fishlegs' arms. "Get him inside, quick, won't you?" she breathed, glanced up at the skies, filled with dragons and screams.

Fishlegs piped out a call to Meatlug and the dragon followed them, a sad and heavy look in his round eyes. Stormfly's shadow fell on them suddenly, as they got inside the Hall, closed the heavy door behind them.

Fishlegs carried him over to the deep inside of the Hall, lit vaguely by a lamp in the corner, the flicker almost dead this soon after dawn. Astrid kept close, trying to help carry him, her own arms suddenly feeling weak and shivering. Fishlegs brought him carefully over a table in the back of the Hall, laid his head at one end, his legs resting limp at the other end. Meatlug hummed something behind them and she rushed over to his rider's right side. Stormfly squawked a low and sad moan.

Hiccup coughed suddenly, and Astrid rushed to his side, watched him cringe to his right and move his hands in and out of clenched fists. "Hiccup-" she said softly, resting a hand on his arm and sliding onto the bench by the table, looked into his tired, wet, and pained eyes. He looked up at her, took a deep breath, pulled the wool fabric over him, shivered. "Astrid?" he whispered, his eyes blinking, glistening.

"Yes?" She moved her head closer to him, brought her left hand suddenly, meaningfully, up to the top of his head, ran her palm in his moist, tangled hair. He inhaled quicker, suddenly, sharper, and she pulled away. He crossed his brows, closed his eyes, breathed a long minute. She gently moved back, rested her hand on his head, held his right hand that lay limp and motionless near the edge of the table.

"Astrid-" Hiccup breathed. "Where's Dad?"

She swallowed. "There's a war outside," she said, simply.

He flinched suddenly, tried to lift his head up, suddenly got it into him to try and sit up. A panic came over him as he scanned the Hall, and he got his right hand out from hers, slipped as he tried to get his foot to grip the table and sit up.

"Hiccup, what's the matter?" Astrid held him gently. He was moving too much. "You need to rest."

"Where's Toothless?" The panic was lacing his voice. "I heard dragon screams."

She swallowed, glanced up at the kids, tensely. He needed to rest, the panic coming over him now, it was making his breath thin again, and she hated the sound of that brittle gasp. It wasn't good and she knew it. "Toothless is- he's okay." She swallowed hard, and he looked at her, a tense brief moment, suddenly, too long. She stood up, put her hands on him gently and brought the fabric over him, trying to ease him down on the table again. "Everything's okay, Hiccup, you need to rest."

"It's not okay, Astrid, where's Toothless-?"

She pressed a hand gently on his chest. "He's fine. You have to rest, Hiccup." Her voice was firm and she hoped desperately to convey the seriousness she had for this.

"_Where's Toothless?_" Hiccup pressed up against her hand, the panic now consuming his voice, shaking it.

"He's fine."

He swallowed, lay down on the table. "Astrid, why are you lying to me?"

It hit her sharply and she felt the kids, somewhere ahead of her in the murky black of the Hall, flinch and step back. She didn't say anything.

She felt him move up against her hand again, look up at her, a tension in his eyes.

"I, uh, don't know where he is," she finally breathed.

"What's happening out there?"

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She told him everything, from the dragon massacre, the invading ships, the Skirra Vellites invading the place, his father out there, chaos.

Chaos.

He inhaled, felt a shiver run through him, a weakness in him he tried to force out. "And Toothless, you couldn't find him?"

"No, not yet, anyway."

He felt a sharp pang hit him, not the injury this time, which was thankfully easing, melding into a constant hum of pain. Toothless. They said Night Furies were some kind of prize? That game they had, the slave told him. It seemed so long ago now, ages ago, when they were fools deceived by that whole tribe. He had to go out and look for Toothless. What if they'd got him already? He didn't know what they were capable of. If they killed so many other dragons already. They can't have gotten Toothless, he refused to believe it. "I have to go out and find him."

"No, Hiccup, we'll do that." She put a hand on him.

He gulped, knew what she was trying to do. "No, I can't- can't stand not doing anything. I need to look for him."

"It's a war zone out there. You stay here."

He could read the hard sincerity on her face as she leaned down to him. He felt the kids there, start to gather around, the flicker of the lone flame somewhere behind him, and in the silence, the shout and hum of noise outside. He couldn't just sit here. He was feeling

so much, better now, he told himself. It wouldn't matter, he just needed to find out if Toothless. . . He needed to find out what happened to him.

"No, Astrid," he said, much harder than he intended. He slid off the table, opposite her, and he lisped a gasp as his side slid along the table's edge. He grabbed the table with his right hand. Fishlegs came up to him suddenly, and Snotlout, wavering there by his side. His legs dropped onto the bench on the left side of the table, his prosthetic falling through the crack between the tabletop and bench. He cringed.

"It's a war outside, Hiccup, are you insane?" Tuffnut snapped suddenly and a hand grabbed his right arm.

"Not until I find out what happened to Toothless I-" He snapped his head around, saw the kids there blocking his path, shock, confused, Fishlegs worried, reaching for him. Astrid was at his side of the table suddenly, grabbed his arm.

"Let me go," he snapped.

"You might get killed out there," she gasped.

"I don't care-" he gasped, tried to lift himself from out of his unbalanced position. He kicked the bench away and suddenly crumbled on the floor, the stone smacking his side suddenly. He cringed and hands reached down, grabbing him from every direction. "Stop, just let me go," he hissed, pushed forward to the other side of the table, crawling on his good arm. Legs appeared on the other side - Astrid, Fishlegs, Ruffnut - or was it Tuff?

Something wavered on his arm suddenly and a fresh throb of warmth pushed out of him. He blinked, cleared his vision, and crawled out from under the table. Someone took hold of his torso gently lifted him up, set him on the bench there, and another hand tried to push him down on his back, to rest, he supposed, but such an idea was the last thing he intended to do.

He slapped his left hand on the table's edge, flinched to have the thing move, to make his shoulder revolve in any direction, tried to keep upright. "Guys, you got to understand," he gasped, tried to push Astrid away, she was all over him, hands on him, pressing him down, a wild desperation in her eyes, looking at him like he had lost his mind.

I would if Toothless was in trouble now.

"Astrid, get off of me," he begged, his right arm getting leverage on the bench, his left on the table.

"I don't want you to die. You're in no condition to go anywhere. They might burn the whole village down, and-"

"Then why aren't you out there helping stop it?" He flinched as a wave of pain hit him suddenly. She let go suddenly, and he slapped back, grabbed the table again. He opened his eyes at her, saw the mingle of emotions in her face, regret, fear - fear of what? "What are you afraid of?"

He got himself off the bench, to his feet. Steadied himself, grabbed her suddenly, catching his balance. He pushed her aside, took a step forward, inhaled suddenly, largely, as the process of motion made him nauseous. The kids were saying something behind him, and he pressed forward, didn't want them to catch up. _One foot over the next, one foot over. . ._ He repeated, fearful of a nauseous wave hitting him again, maybe make him lose his balance. He couldn't afford that, not now. His prosthetic hit the spot where the most of his blood lay, still wet, on the floor. He inhaled, pushed open the door and blinked at the influx of light hitting him suddenly.

A wail hit him suddenly, wails and screams and the sound of voices shouting, screaming, a flicker, rush, of fire and the shudder of waves being tossed about by ships, many ships. He let his eyes adjust, felt someone behind him, panicked, stepped outside and snapped his prosthetic on the stone. He gasped, stepped down the first step, the next, rushed down, down the stone steps.

"Hiccup-" Behind him.

He didn't look back, felt the world rush across him, a rush, he realized, of people, Hooligans, dragons, schools of Terrors scrambling like a hundred lizards across the plaza, taking flight in front of him, the shiver of their wings above him, shocking him. And a swoosh deathly near, of wings, a Nightmare above him, fire breathing out to his left - a Nadder lashing out at a man threatening it with a hammer. The hammer swung and the Nadder went down, rolled upright again and opened its mouth to fire and-

"Hiccup!"

A flap of wings hit him suddenly and he almost shook to the ground. "Take my hand." He squinted up, through the light of the sun that slanted on the horizon. Astrid, on Stormfly, hovering, landing next to him, leaning down sharply. "At least you won't be on foot," she shouted, through a sudden blast of fire from somewhere close. He hesitated. "Take my hand!" she shouted, a sudden conviction in her voice.

"Get out of there!" said a voice far away, some adult in the distance. To them? He looked over briefly, saw Meatlug taking off, Snotlout and Fishlegs on his round back. Ruffnut was trailing her brother, his step firm and heavy, his arms still a murky red. Hiccup turned away, grabbed Astrid's outstretched arm with his right hand, just enough strength in him, enough willpower, and enough adrenaline to make him ignore the weakness wracking his body.

Stormfly sprinted up, flapped wide and strong into the dragon-filled sky, the clouds all flying away in a sudden cold, clammy wind, the sun still misty behind some watery wash of cloud, trapped behind a gray veil. He inhaled suddenly, sharply, grasped her tightly, dug his right arm into her waist, pushed his head into her back, cold in the rush of air.

The air swooshed around him starkly, and he looked up, squinted, his eyes popping open at the vision - dragons, half of them laying motionless on the ground, the other half livid and lashing out at the sky, some with riders, some without, and ships- scattered thickly near Berk, sails rolled, arrows shooting out, and - he gasped - a boulder coming through the air. Stormfly ducked, sending them down,

down- she rose suddenly and the motion drove a shaft of pain into him, the imbalance making him latch onto her stronger, tighter. He forced his eyes open, looked amidst all the dragons, for that black one, the one that he didn't want to find on the ground lying still.

Astrid swooshed Stormfly towards his house. She pointed, shouted. "The stirrup's gone. Did you equip him?"

Hiccup caught his breath, gulped to moisten his suddenly dry mouth. "No," he squeaked. Stormfly swept up, towards the sounds of war, the smack of weapons clashing under them, dragon cries. "Where do you think he'd go?" she screamed. He shook his head, confused, grasped her tighter and leaned over, scanned the ground, the fallen dragons, the spaces between the houses and buildings filled with people and chaos. Dragons, too many of them, everywhere, and people, in masses of confusion, someone shouting, too many of them shouting, deep heavy groans of the sort that a peace knew was foreign.

No Toothless.

Astrid swept up, glided down on the edge of the village, her dragon lost in the mass of wings everywhere, the arrows passing them vaguely, unaimed and uneven. More of the same below, the same chaos, terrible chaos, a house sparked on fire, the flames gargled, licked up towards them. Stormfly shot back, Astrid leaned backwards, Hiccup shot his left arm forward to grab her for support, gasped as his side turned and the wound screamed at him.

"Are you all right?" Astrid gasped at him suddenly.

"Is a guy who's just been stabbed ever _all right?_" he hissed through clenched teeth.

"Oh, Hiccup-" Something pained laced her voice.

He cleared his throat, scanned the war zone under them, getting desperate suddenly. "Toothless!" he shouted, a gasp ending his scream. "_Toothless_."

Nothing.

"Where did he _go?_" he shouted, pushing his head into her back and forcing his left arm around her, cringing as he did, both arms around her, hissed as the wind snuck in between the cloths around shoulder.

He peered down suddenly. "Hookfang!" The red dragon was splayed out on the ground, a small figure kneeling besides her. "Astrid, get down there," he gasped. The dragon jolted to a halt, and Hiccup slid off, holding her hand to help himself down. He stumbled forward towards the dragon, in the shadow of a tall house, blocking them from a clear vision of the madness of the attack. The red dragon turned her head slightly, slowly towards him and hummed to the figure there next to her. "Snotlout, what happened?" Hiccup panted, reaching them.

"They almost got her, _they almost got her_," he shouted, a rush of heated emotions infusing his voice. He whimpered suddenly, and turned and patted the weak Nightmare. Hiccup knelt down beside her, ran a hand over her head. She looked up at him, eyes lolling and weak. His

heart started beating fast, the closeness of this horror. Her chest was wounded, a dirty, grimy wound shattering her beautiful red and black scales. That gurgle of dragon blood sputtering from the base of her neck. Something sharp clenched his heart and Astrid was there beside him suddenly. He looked up at her, saw her look. She wasn't surprised anymore, a hard kind of acceptance of the horror.

He curved his right arm around, shook off his vest, and grabbed it from the ground. He stepped over to the rush of blood, pushed it into the wound. The cool air tickled into him suddenly and he clenched his chattering teeth. Rope, something, he needed to keep it there, some kind of hold for it. "Get me something," he shot behind him, "rope or-"

"Here."

Astrid slid down next to him, wound a strip of fabric around the Nightmare's chest and abdomen. She looked at him, his bare tunic, his exposed left shoulder. "You're gonna be cold."

He shivered suddenly. "Just don't remind me."

She stepped up and he saw that one of her arms was bare of the arm bands she always wore. He stood up, patted Snotlout. "You got to get Hookfang out of here."

"What?" he mumbled, clearly still in shock.

"I don't know. . . get her safe, someplace." Hiccup stepped to Stormfly, almost wished he hadn't given his vest away, just thinking now of the wind that there'd be flying on Stormfly.

"What about you?" Astrid's voice came at him suddenly.

"What about me?" He put up his right hand to Astrid, to get up.

"Safe, someplace." She mimicked him, grabbed his hand and hauled him up. He clenched his teeth, sucked in the pain and shook his head, smarted as his wound pumped warm again. "What about Toothless," he said, not a question.

A scream whipped at them suddenly and he looked up, saw the twins on Belch and Barf, flapping hotly towards the heat of the battle. Stormfly pumped her wings up, flapped into the air, slanted to the side, avoiding a pair of Gronckles mounted by a axe-wielding Hooligans. "Watch out!" someone screamed and Hiccup glanced up, saw a Nightmare mounted by a familiar face. He flapped down closer to them. Sven pointed at Hiccup suddenly, a harried look on his face and his brown beard crinkled and uncombed. "The dead dragons are making the live ones go crazy. We can't control them all. Get a move on that."

"Hey, Hiccup's hurt!" Astrid screamed out, but Sven had flapped away already, his dragon sweeping wide and vast towards the battle below.

Hiccup felt his mouth go dry again, the wash of cold wind on him making him shiver, hold her tighter in a vain attempt to get warm, the cold taking over his nerves from the throb of his shoulder. They

can't be that bad off, right? He looked around, sure there was some dragons who were clearly losing it, a couple of their riders trying to get them to fly, to go out and battle. Sure, he could help with that, get them to calm, do the stuff they called him the Dragon Whisperer for. But. . . "We got to find Toothless first," he said into her ear. He prayed they weren't losing, that his Dad was still okay somewhere down there in the chaos. "We got to make this quick."

"Sure." She banked Stormfly, swept on over the village, the houses, the burning houses at the edges. Astrid's house. She must have seen it, too, turned Stormfly away, over the shore. "There wasn't anything important there anyway," she mumbled. He grimaced, put a hand on the top of her leg. She smirked, sighed, swept up into the sky. "You still think he's somewhere here?" She swept over the village again.

He felt his fingers so numb, the unfeeling almost a blessing considering the alternative. "I don't _know_, Astrid." He hunkered down on her, wrapped his arms around her. "He's rigged, so does that mean. . . I don't want to think they took him. But. . . why else can't we find him?" He refused to believe he'd been killed. But he _was_ the prize dragon. But then why rig him? "Where would they take him?" Heather - the name made his nerves spark suddenly - seemed to like him. She was the only one who could feasibly take him, perhaps, maybe. Being in the same room. "I don't know," he breathed aloud. "He's with them somehow." He could feel it, feel that that was the only way.

"There's one place we haven't looked," she said suddenly, hovering briefly, looking at the schools of dragons hovering over the ships on the shore. She jolted back suddenly, swept Stormfly around in a curved bank, headed for the shore. He took a deep breath, knew where she was going, braced himself.

"Take us in fast, Stormfly, get in, get out. Keep your eyes open, Hiccup, we're not doing this twice." Astrid patted her dragon and she swept forward into the mess of arrows, the ocean of wings and screaming, the mindless, living mass of things flying, fast and slow, deep, guttural sounds coming from the ships below, the snap of arrows leaving their crossbows, the rush of catapults slapping forward, the heave of ships on the sea, the flap of wings, someone screaming for them to get out, the wind in his ears, crawling through the shards of the top of his tunic, freezing him until he swore he couldn't feel his body anymore.

Keep your eyes open.

He looked down, squinted in the sharp vicious wind, looked. Old memories came shooting back into his brain and in the cold numbing wind he saw fire, fire on ships, looking for Toothless, a dark gray sky and caught his breath, smelled a stark odor of burning wood, realized it was all real again. His mouth went dry again and his vision flickered, _don't let it_, slapped himself suddenly, tried to keep back the wavering feeling that hit him, wasn't sure if he was drifting off into something unreal. "_Toothless?_" he screamed and suddenly Stormfly ducked, rolled, and Astrid screamed, and he saw arrows flying past them, a ship coming in on them closely. "Go, go, go!" she shouted, Stormfly sweeping up, out, away, forward, over the armada, swinging catapults over the ocean, rocks flying towards Berk.

Why can't I help them? Where was Toothless? Afar, a lone ship churning out at full sail farther from the others, moving, rather than staying still at one point, and on its deck, a dark black shape and his heart jumped. He grabbed the back of Astrid's arm, leaned forward. "_There_", he shouted, shifted his prosthetic suddenly, realized he was on Stormfly. "_GO!_" he screamed, impatient, and Stormfly fled forward, the sweep coming to a halt as a rush of arrows sped at them, and a shout from the ship.

He could see Toothless there on the deck, his black body and the strapped wings, the tail flapping and the red tail, and the people. _Heather_. His nerves chilled him, sent his teeth chattering. So she'd captured him. Something hot pushed its way into his heart and he itched to just be let down into the ship, get Toothless out of there.

Astrid screamed suddenly, something hot and convicted, curved Stormfly harder to the right, swept up, around the ship, another rush of arrows coming at them. "Down!" Hiccup shouted, Stormfly screamed, and suddenly, down, _down_, Hiccup could feel the shiver under his legs, Astrid calling something to her dragon, the Nadder wailing, and he knew it, knew they were going out of control.

Can't be.

The wings went out sharply, tried to stop the fall, Stormfly screamed, the water came at them, Hiccup braced himself. They were falling forwards, Astrid closer to the cold ocean, the dragon screaming in some kind of pain. He gritted his teeth, shifted his weight, his body, suddenly, got himself lower than her, the dragon upside down, Astrid above him. He grabbed her tight and bent down against the dragon's body, shouted as his wound came crashing back with feeling, as the cold block of water slapped, smacked them, smacked him and made him gasp, gulp in the salty sea water, open his eyes into the murky blue, inhaled again, _not a good idea_, gasped, more water in his lungs. He rasped sharply, felt himself sinking, the weakness hitting him now with a force. Stormfly was somehow somewhere else, he felt alone in the growing blackness, pumped his legs, his arms, stopped as the pain shot back in him with the water, the horrid salt, the cold. He hissed, felt his head mull nonsense to him. And then. . . _Toothless_. He jabbed his right arm, his prosthetic, felt sinking, lower. _Astrid!_ _No._

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"Did you hit it?" Rune shouted, his voice sharp and thick in the excitement of battle, as he leaned over the ship's edge, a feeling of keen triumph in his bones.

"Yes, sir!" came a warrior. Rune turned, saw him still with his bow held high in the air, at the spot where the Nadder had dropped from the sky. Rune sighed, grunted in a wonderfully sane and living satisfaction. "This is beautiful," he said, feeling the thickness of meaning in his own words. He hadn't felt this alive since the battle of more than a month ago, and even then it wasn't as freeing as this now, this moment, this glorious moment where he could finally let out all he felt for that blasted brother of his, and the cursed offspring who took his love away. All those years, those horrible eighteen years, without her, and then as if Fate had wanted him wasted and miserable for the rest of his life, that news which came so recently.

Alvin was right. The kid was a Dragon Whisperer now. Blast those curses, do they only last sixteen years? Fate was horrendous at keeping her promises. But now. . . He looked out at the burning houses on the shore, the dead dragons somewhere behind the structures, and Stoick's runt of a son, finally dead, gone, and given justice. He wanted to shout, wanted to live, wanted to tell the world, tell Fate, who had finally cheated her. The thought of dying was ugly now, not when he felt this alive. How his daughter was right. Why did he doubt her? He turned around at Heather, expecting a raised fist of approval, or a flashed sword of agreement, a smile of triumph.

But he got none of that.

She was looking nowhere, out at the sea, lingering her eyes at the rippled circles of water where the Nadder had splashed down with her strange set of two riders. He hadn't thought much about it, children sometimes were put into war - when the enemy was desperate - but Heather seemed to be thinking something else. It bothered him. She needed to be happy now, she was supposed to be happy. Of all the joys - years of planning and frustration, the last year in which his mind had been tested the most - all of that was behind them now, the fire of battle and blood was fresh and thrilling, it made him feel life, something infused in him. And now, with the purpose of their journey nearly over, he was filled with an awesome joy.

"Heather, what's wrong?"

She snapped her head back to look at him, averted her eyes.

"Heather, look at me."

She glanced up, briefly, her cape fluttering in the wind behind her, her hand reaching out to the edge of the ship, to support her as the hull lurched upward suddenly in a gale. "Nothing," she mumbled and stepped back, turned her back to him. He considered his move briefly, whether to follow her or not. She was an independent woman, a strong personality, and he respected her. But he wanted her happy. He stepped forward, put a hand on her shoulder. "This is a great moment, for both of us."

She didn't turn around, turned her head to look at the dragon, that black beast she'd ridden on. The one the Dragon Whisperer had subjugated. The beast was quiet now, strapped up in leather and ropes, a moment of surrender, from his livid lashing before. They'd have a grand chase killing him in the hunt back at Herkja. One of the world's greatest dragons, in one of the greatest moments of his life. Heather had mentioned something of an altered plan with regards to that aspect, when she brought the dragon down here. I'd have to ask her again. The excitement of war mulled away any other topics from his mind.

She cleared her throat suddenly. "We, uh, didn't kill all the dragons, Dad," she said. He could feel that this was not quite the thing that was troubling her. He knew her, and there was something else on her mind.

She raised her voice slightly. "The dragons still alive are fighting us now, beating us."

That was a bigger point.

He turned and looked at Berk, the fire on the houses, the schools of dragons flitting about his ships near the shore. "Are you saying we might lose?"

"Not lose," she said quickly. "We never lose. Just not . . . win."

He raised a brow. Sarcasm was not one of her strong points, usually. "Explain," he said, still on a high from battle, and quite refusing to think defeat was anywhere in sight.

"We used all we learned, and they taught us so much, but the dragons are not as weak as we think they made them out to be. From the reports, I think we only got a third of them." He felt her swallow, watched her look out at their ships, a few of them lit up in flames, some of them turning back, sails alive with wind and gales. He could hear his men shouting, fighting the flying reptiles with arrows and boulders, his own ship being turned sharply to the back, ostensibly to protect him and the prize dragon and his council. He hadn't expected to lose this battle, _hadn't expected dragons, I suppose_, was looking forward to watching his brother's tribe finally know the truth of his brother and him, thought that today would end with a sunset over the burning Hooligan village and a final last meeting of him and Stoick, over the runt's lifeless body perhaps, just to bring the point home.

But, _this_ . . . losing?

"It's not that we are giving up," she said, as if reading his mind. "We need to _regroup_, rethink our strategy." She pulled away from under his hand, turned and faced him. "I know everything about dragons now, me and my council. We can train our own dragons, fight Stoick on his own terms. Should we risk so much now, when we now are the ones caught off guard?" She exhaled suddenly, looked back at the staff, the council members leaning over the edge of the ship.

Maybe she was right.

"Perhaps," he said. The ship moved suddenly east, and she made a motion with her arm towards the others, motioning them back. There were more of their ships on fire, and he could see his own warriors flailing in the waves, not to mention dragons, some of whom they managed to down, their blood mingling on top of the water, their riders splashing alongside them, most of the beasts still living, screaming from the top of the waves, angry and flustered.

Heather moved away from him, towards the end of the ship, faced the spot again where the Nadder had gone down. It was farther now, seeing as they'd moved away from there by this time, and he could see something splashing in the water, wasn't sure if it was dragon or rider. She looked at the spot, the waves all obliterating the area now, and he wondered what exactly she was thinking. What was it about that one random dragon?

She looked back suddenly, at the dragon in their ship. He followed her gaze, still trying to read her. She had a sympathy in her eyes, as she watched the black beast breathing, his form moving up and down

gently. Her previous words finally came back. She had wanted to keep it, that was what she'd said. He shook his head. A strange notion. But now . . . if she wanted to create a dragon force, like his brother's. . . He felt a sudden pang of disgust rise up inside of him, looked out at his ships, the dragons blasting endlessly into them, and he could feel, didn't want to admit it, but she was probably right. Don't doubt her.

14. Chapter 12: To Save a Dragon

a/n: My sister is getting a hang of writing the Toothless scenes for this novel, and she really helped out a lot on this chapter. I hope you enjoy the update!

View the illustration at the official webpage. Put a period where the dashes are: [howtotrainyourdragon2 - thecomicseries - com](http://howtotrainyourdragon2-thecomicsseries-com)
>or at my deviantArt gallery: [inhonoredglory - deviantart - gallery - 38855965](http://inhonoredglory-deviantart-gallery-38855965)<p>

* * *

><p>How to Train Your Dragon II
>The Dragon Whisperer

**Act II
>A World Shattered
**

**Chapter 12
>To Save a Dragon
**

Her eyes popped open and she pumped her legs down, down into the ocean, not willing herself to scream out a warning or panic, lest the water dive into her lungs. Hiccup. She put her arms out in front of her, drove her body towards him, that face clearly lost of consciousness.

She knew it was a bad idea to look for Toothless like this. But Hiccup just had to go do it and now look at this. He might-

Never.

She pushed down one more time, looked back and saw Stormfly up at the surface, a flash of silhouetted wings. She was alive. Astrid let that comfort her a little. She was a tough girl, she'll make it with whatever injury the arrow had given her.

She concentrated on getting Hiccup now, finally reached his limp figure in the green water, put an arm around his torso. He was breathing out bubbles now, his eyes closed and his mouth open. She brushed her fingers over his face, rubbed her palm over his cheek. Don't leave me now. He had to wake up. She grabbed his right arm, slung it over her shoulder, pumped her legs to the surface. He wasn't responding, a dead weight behind her. And the surface- the impact had thrown them so low. Time, she needed to give him air. She threw her arm forward, sent him floating forward limply, grabbed him and pushed him forward, pumped her legs hot and thick behind her, cursed the heavy boots, and saw the light above the water. "Aaargh!" she shouted, let out the water in her mouth, got through the last stretch

to the surface, broke into the air, gasped, panted, turned to Hiccup, still limp and lifeless floating on his back in front of her. She put her hand under his head, the other around him. "Wake up!" she gasped, looked out quickly, saw that the ship was farther away now, Stormfly kicking her wings and squawking not far from them, and the smoke, the fire in the air, thick brown and gray clouds over Berk. She inhaled a deep breath, turned back to Hiccup. "Hiccup-" He was still motionless. She took his head in one hand, pinched his nose with the other. She pressed her mouth to his thin, pale lips and breathed out. _Don't die on me now._

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War was not the way he expected to wake up that morning. And now, screaming orders madly, his voice was amazingly getting hoarse, the panic in him - not out of fear, but plain stupid ignorance and blindness. How could he be so blind? How could he have trusted his brother after all these years? There was no forgiveness in that scum of a man, no, _no_-

He sighed hotly, ran up the slope to the house again. "Thornado!" he shouted, as the dragon slid forward and they met on impact, Stoick leaping onto the dragon's back in one learned motion. He shouted some bungled orders to the dragon, the words coming out in some hot mash of nonsense syllables, the dragon roaring and soaring up into the air, knowing instinctively what he was asking.

"Get those dragons out of there, and get them in the air!" he shouted to the ground, his warriors a mess of nerves and shock, the dead dragons and the panicking live ones. Where was Hiccup? Damn the war, the Skirra VÃ©l, and _Rune_, the lying piece of scum. He should have never bought it, how much of an idiot can a man be?

Thornado flapped up and Stoick reined him in. He'd given his orders, got his men to organize themselves to some extent, put a semblance of sanity in the madness that was being surprised by the enemy before dawn.

Where _was_ that boy?

He didn't have time right now, he needed to get an overview of the battle, tell his Council, get the ships- "Get those ships out there, east side and give it all you got!"

"Yes, sir!" shouted the man on the dragon in front of him, as he flapped madly away to the shore and the puff and ooze of smoke thick below. Stoick flew inland a minute, found Gobber on the plaza, hauling out his weapons stash and passing swords to the panicked Hooligans. "Gobber!" Stoick shouted, swooping low. "You find my son and get him out of here." He didn't bother to look for a nod of agreement, flapped up and away into the thick of war. He needed to see the scope of this madness, there were too many cursed ships in the harbor. What had they, brought the whole blasted fleet with them? Dragons were thick in the air everywhere, arrows and boulders flying, screams and splashes, dragons flailing in the sea, _ships_ flailing in the shallow waters, burning and dying. Through the thick ash, over the harbor's expanse, about a hundred Skirra VÃ©l ships visible, perhaps a third burning near the shores of Berk. The dragons were lambasting them without a pause for breath, doing a mighty job of it, coming in relentless waves, Monstrous Nightmares flocking together,

Nadders joining in groups, Zipplebacks taking turns shooting gas and fire down below. Even Gronckles buzzing just above the waves, blasting the sides of ships with spats of molten rock. Yet no purple shockwave, no Night Fury screaming down from the skies to dive-bomb ten ships at a time. Hiccup wouldn't waste time - he'd get in the fight if he was able. _If he was able._

"Hiccup!" he shot across the squawking, burning vista, not really believing his son was in earshot. He yelled more orders to the men on dragons passing him, barking out the open spots to shoot at. He searched downward again, taking in the enemy.

The vast fleet of ships, many times that of Berk's number, collected in row upon row that stretched from one end of Berk to the other, engulfing the harbor, spilling out into the open sea beyond. Ships so densely packed in lines that they formed walls of war with barely a break from the bombardment. Yet they weren't moving forward. They were edging away, pushing away, from the shore towards the open sea. _Retreating._

But the dragons continued to fall, continued to panic with the smell of the blood of their dead or injured comrades down below in the reddening waters. The semi-ordered lines of dragons broke and scattered with each wave of flying arrows. The arrows and boulders flew so thickly from the retreating ships that masses of dragons fell at the same time, the survivors circling back in hot attack and equally hot counterattack. Heavy tolls on both sides.

He pulled up Thornado, shouted a war cry and let the dragon blast thickly into a ship, sending its sails riveting in the waves of air and noise, the mast clanging into the one behind it, a clang of wood against wood, hull on hull, and shouting, the crisp cut of arrows flying up into the air. Stoick turned Thornado up, just missed the flood of arrows at him, ascended and sailed along the armada, a shot here and there, thrown at him. He wanted to get to the end of it, the edge of the fleet, see how far it went, find the ship that held his brother, blast that thing out of the water. He shouted a hot scream and Thornado pumped forward, screaming out a booming force of vibrating air.

There was a ship farther, separated from the rest, bigger than the rest, something that could have been more beautiful, were it not for the darkened, decaying wood of its hull and the frayed criss-cross of leather on its dirty sail. But the detailed bow ornamentation, still bright and defined-

It was the chief's ship, he could feel it in his bones. Out here, at the back of the pack, a coward, afraid, how low could he go? Fire welled up inside of him, a burning rage at such deception and dishonor. He yanked on Thornado's bridle, locked eyes on the lone ship, still some distance out there-

"Stoick!"

He stopped suddenly, Thornado threw his wings into a heaving hover, growling.

"Stoick-" the voice was breathless, below him somewhere, in the ocean. Astrid's. He turned down quickly. She was small in the water, the figments of ash and burning embers around her, waves lapping at

her, and- and-

The thin shape next to her, lying on his back, the water lapping up his sides, covering his legs, her arms on him, holding his head up, worry on her face.

"Hiccup-" he gasped.

Stoick yanked Thornado down, and the dragon dived, splashed, sunk, into the water, the ocean around him for a breathless moment, the dragon emerging out with a vicious splash and floating alongside the wet figures in the sea. "What's happened to him?" Stoick gasped, pushing the dragon towards his son and the girl. She inhaled a gasping breath. "He's been stabbed, and-" She splashed a hand up to wipe her face.

"Stabbed. . ."

"-We were looking for Toothless and they shot us-"

The word still hung in the air.

Astrid put her other hand suddenly under Hiccup's head. "He's not coming to. We got to get him out of here." Her voice was cracking. "Stormfly's okay, she's hurt but. . ."

Sense kicked into him suddenly and her voice faded, as a sudden anger fired inside of him. His son, so still in the water before him, pale and lifeless, the wet and bloodstained bandage on his bare shoulder, the ripped clothing- He splashed closer to Hiccup, leaned down from Thornado and got his hands under Hiccup's head. "Help me get him up here." She took Hiccup's legs, and they hoisted the boy onto Stoick's lap, carried him up out of the water and into his arms. "Get on," he said, eyes still locked on the pale figure of his son, slumped in his left arm, his body cold and wet. His right hand tightened hotly around Thornado's bridle and he didn't care that his knuckles were turning white pressing into themselves around the rope. Hot and angry and- _Rune_.

Thornado rose suddenly, wings flapping vast and wide, splashing. Stormfly was wailing in the water and Astrid called down to her, "Keep strong, girl, I'm coming to get you-" She turned to Stoick, put a hand on his shoulder. "Tell me Hiccup will be all right."

"He's not dying. Not in my arms, he's not."

She squeezed his big arm, and Thornado swept low. She jumped off, splashed near where the injured dragon flailed in the waves. It wasn't that far to a Hooligan ship. Stoick turned and yanked the bridle, soared above the fray.

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The reddened orb of the sun had fallen into the sea long ago, and even the blush of violet washing over the sky in its wake had faded away. Toothless gazed at the pattern of stars, watching them trek their nightly journeys in the sky above the ships, little pinpricks of light, markers of navigation when he flew in the dark, on a moonless night like this. But he wasn't flying this night.

He shifted his body, the crisscrossing leather cords tight and uncomfortable. He snorted at them, tried jerking more sharply, but halted at the uselessness of the effort. For hours he'd fought against the bonds, fought all the while the battle raged on Berk. Houses on fire, dragons screaming, falling, dying. Boulder after boulder and arrow after arrow fired from the ships, from the very ship he was trapped in, fired into the little village and smacking dragon after dragon clear out of the sky. Dragons he knew by name, flew beside every day. Even Stormfly - Astrid and Hiccup on her. _Hiccup_. He shook his head, snorted again, hot with rage as he clawed the wooden panels below him. He jerked his head up as a human moaned near him - a Skirra VÃ©llite lying on his side among the prostrate, sleeping bunch of warriors. The armor on the man clinked as he turned on his side, opened an eye, shot a look at Toothless.

"Shut up dragon," the gruff voice muttered as the figure rolled over to face away, settled back into the blanket on the hard floorboards of the ship. Toothless growled low, narrowed his eyes at the warrior's back. That man. The same man he had taken the axe from in the Great Hall, the same one who shot the Nadder and her two riders into the sea. He was sure she was Stormfly, sure he saw Hiccup on her behind his sun-haired girl, even from this difficultly far vantage point. Hiccup, without his fur, his shoulder stained red, staring down at him, _him_. He knew those green eyes, knew he wanted to land on the ship, free him, fly him, save him. But that arrow. He screamed at Stormfly to turn, but it was too late. She fell, upside down, and-

Hiccup. _If you didn't make it . . ._

He whined a growl, his chest hurting, seething, raging. He whipped his head to the sleeping Skirra VÃ©llite only a little distance from his snout, his teeth clicking sharp and hot. _Killer_. He shot glares at the sleeping forms across the deck, lying silently, quietly, peacefully. Axes, swords, crossbows, hammers, all resting silently beside the mounds of warm, breathing bodies under soft cloths, snoring and shifting on the hard deck. Murderers.

No. He shook his head. Can't be. Hiccup can't be dead. He just can't. If he died, he'd know it, his chest would feel it. Hiccup couldn't get a bruise on his knee without him knowing about it. He didn't know how, but he knew. He must be alive. Despite what they did.

His body shook with a renewed intensity, rage rippling through his muscles. He eyed the sleeping Skirra VÃ©llite near him. Brandr, they called him. Helmet off his head by his side, body relaxed under the metal shingles coating him, the flaxen cloth draping over his hulking form, his breaths coming in and out easily. Too easily. He heaved his tail towards the figure, to slap it, to shake it awake, to make it gasp, make it hurt. Anything but breathe. But a pained yelp escaped himself instead. His tail stung, splinters of wood digging into his scales. The crates. He curved his head back, saw the neat row of wooden crates still lying over the length of his tail, immobilizing it, numbing it, the last one flattening over the red fin. Yeah, forgot about those wretched things. "That'll teach you," Brandr had spat at his face that morning when the warrior shoved the crates on him after he had flicked his tail for the fifth time. Tripped nine warriors smack on their faces and backs with one clean sweep - at

least he stopped them from shooting down Thornado. The people hurled insults at him, but that man in particular enjoyed putting him in misery. Every time Brandr passed him during the battle, he'd smack the wood end of his axe into his nose or the side of his head. He almost did it with the other end once, but the girl had stopped him, told him to leave the Night Fury alone. The guy never quite followed that order, and it made his scales itch and his jaws chafe at the strap whenever he came near.

Toothless shuddered, closed his eyes, opened them again. To be at the mercy of these people. Without claw, teeth, or fire to fight back. Flightless, defenseless. His ear flaps flattened, his wings clung closer to his body under the crisscrossing cords. His breathing suddenly shallowed, quickened, his legs bunching under him, muscles ready to bolt. But couldn't. He let out a sighing, ragged breath, lowered his head, stared at the wooden boards below him. Unfocused his eyes. An image of a red-headed boy there, fur, green tunic, holding out his hand and grinning. "Where does it hurt, bud?" the green eyes furrowed, the little mouth tight, the gentle hand moving over his nose, stroking the side of his head. He purred. _That's the spot, yeah, keep going._ He closed his eyes, almost could feel little fingers tickling him, caressing his ear flaps. _Do it again, Hiccup._ The caressing started getting cold, creaking noises coming from the image.

He shot open his eyes. Just floorboards there. A cold wind, blowing over his head and back, pushing hard against the sail, whistling and creaking into the horizontal beam above him. A rising panic struck him, staring at the flat floor, the feeling of the waves fighting against the ship. A feeling that had been welling up and subsiding constantly in him ever since he got trapped onboard. _I hate ships. Sucked two summers ago, still suck now._ He tried to gurgle the last part nonchalantly, but a shiver ran up his back as he clenched his jaw, willed his body to still. Never could stand sitting in any deck too long, except for Hiccup's ship. He'd had nightmares of this very thing. "Just your imagination," Hiccup would tell him, after he found him growling awake on the stone slab, coming to him, patting his head, saying it was all right, all in the past. "And the past doesn't come back. Now go to sleep, bud."

But I can't go to sleep. He raised his head at the vibrating sails, perked his ears at the creaking boards, shifted against the constraining bonds over his wings, the leather strap tight over his mouth and connected by chain to the leather collar around his neck.

How could this be happening again?

_Where you taking me? _He throatied low at the ship, his claws scratching the sails above whispered back, the wood creaked, every rope shuffled some faint sound that kept his ear flaps shifting and his eyes roving from sail to sail. The ship clipping the waters, moving onward, onward, from the rising of the sun over the sea to the setting under it. No land, just endless water and endless sailing. He had jerked and shoved for so long underneath that sun as it climbed above him, growing tired as it sank underneath the waters. He watched those sails, those people, those floorboards, those birds gliding after the ships in the ashen gray sky. Same thing all day long. Didn't even get to chew out a juicy fish to give him something to vent his rage and hunger on. One time, that girl held a small fish

near his mouth, but he growled, startled her away. Maybe he shouldn't have. He could use that fish right now.

His nostrils flared suddenly. A scent, faint but sure. Dirt and rocks mingling with the smell of salt and sea. He jerked his head higher, peered at the blackness beyond the ship's edge. Blacker silhouettes, craggy shadows, jutting out of the sea at the edge the horizon. Eerily familiar. He wrinkled his eyes shut, tried to concentrate his mind. He knew where he was. He could feel the place coming back, the pattern of the jagged rocks sparking a memory many summers forgotten. He suddenly sensed a vaster jag of land farther ahead, sense it coming in the distance. His mind raced. The ship moved slow. But how slow? He thought hard, tried feeling the speed of the wood under him as it hit the waves. About as fast as a human walked. Might take till the next sun setting before they reached it. But by flight time, it was as close as the sun's rising, maybe sooner. Of all the islands . . .

He shoved against the straps with renewed energy, heaved at them desperately. He looked up suddenly, across the expanse of bright darkness, the pinpoints of light scattered across the black dome above him. He stood still, watching for a shadow across the stars. An elusive shadow, a shadow that only came out at night and in storms. He scanned the sky, the star patterns creeping across the dome as he kept looking, watching, the ship relentlessly clipping the waves, moving forward, forward.

Then he saw it. A black flash across the stars. Unmistakable. The small sleek silhouette, almost the form of a Night Fury, but its body thinner, its head pointed, its wings sharp. Strong, pumping wings, flying towards the ships. Several larger shadows behind it, vast in wingspan and circling high in a gliding pattern. Timberjacks. Six of them, circling after the first silhouette, circling towards the ships, circling over the ships, like vultures searching for a carcass on the beach. He crouched his head low, flattened his wings, held every muscle still, as the shadow crossed the first line of ships ahead, hovering over each ship in turn, the small eyes of the leading shadow searching each deck. Only a couple more lines of ships and his ship would be next. Blasted. He shut his eyes from the sky, tried to hide the conspicuous brightness of their green glow. But it was useless. He could already smell the Skrill, and that meant the Skrill could already smell him.

He froze at a sudden swish of fluttering above him. The wood floor beneath him pitched down just slightly, a small weight adding itself to the ship. A sharp mutter shot from his chest; he opened his eyes, raised his head towards the ship's mast. A pair of small yellow eyes stared back at him, tiny eyes at the end of a long pointed snout, framed by a crown of spikes shooting out of a short neck and a slim gray and purple body, his pointed wings folding in as he settled himself on the horizontal beam of the mast as his spiked tail swung low towards the deck, curling down, nearly touching Toothless' snout. Those claws clutching the beam above him, several of them missing. Skari.

Toothless bristled at the cool breath blowing down on him, could feel Skari panting a bit shallow. A suppressed gnashing rose from the Skrill's jaws.

You're hard to find, Dagr. Harder to corner. Fortunately, the humans

made my job easy. _The slim jaws clicked their sharp teeth, the little eyes glancing upward at the vast circling wings above the ship, great shadows blocking out the stars. _And this time, I've brought friends._

Toothless stared back at the little eyes, could see them roving over his head and body, his wings and tail, over the straps and the cords and the crates. He could smell the menace, the glee, reeking out of Skari. He stifled a growl, clamped his mouth tighter a moment. _Breath, just breath. He can smell you._ He let out a breath as the dragon above him continued to survey him. The others above, the Timberjacks, were peering down too, gawking at him as they circled, like he was some caged animal. Yeah, that's what he was. It was bad enough that humans gawked like that, but other dragons?

He shot a glare at one Timberjack, his long head lowering a bit too close for his taste. _Had your look. Now back off. _Toothless spat. The Timberjack's eyes widened and his neck tucked away from the ship, the big wings lifting higher.

Skari's cold breath chilled him suddenly. _Shut up Dagr. What you gonna do, shoot a fireball at him? I can break your neck right now you piece of black scum. And you can't do a thing about it._ The slim snout lowered, hissed and gurgled. The Timberjacks gurgled too, their jaws clacking, their wings flapping with the beat of their amusement. Toothless shot a snarl at Skari, flexed his jaw tightly underneath the strap as the six horned heads peered low at him, purring to one another. Something hot welled inside him, washed through his chest and shoulders as his breaths quickened and his nostrils flared. He could smell the bloody anticipation in Skari, in the Timberjacks, eying him, clacking their jaws. He dared not return the insult, was in no position to return the insult, had to think, _think_. He knew why Skari hated him, but these Timberjacks? He could hear their sharp wings slicing through the air, nearly clipping the mast, too eager to touch him.

What you want from me? He throated to the myriad of wings, the slim snake-like heads paralleling the ship on his right, his left, above him.

Your blood, traitor. One head squealed down as his glowing eye glanced over him, the shifting winds whistling over the leading edge of his green-gray wings.

Toothless tensed, the leather hot on him suddenly, hot and compressive. He knew what dragon packs did to traitors. The scum of the dragon world, the betrayers of the flock, weren't simply tolerated. He'd seen them dragged by the neck out of the nest, clawing and squawking within the suffocating mass of dragons biting at them, dragging them, until silence. He never liked what they did to them, but they endangered the flock, they had to die. Suddenly his mind flashed, flashed through some sixty plus summers and winters of his life, trying to cull up anything he did that could garner such a charge.

What are we waiting for. The Timberjack's low mutter stabbed through him.

His comrade hummed back. _It's our duty you know._

The masses of gliding wings lowered, landing gently on the masts of the other ships, so gentle that they only dipped the ships like the slender swells of the open sea. The compression of the straps started choking him, the crates unbearable over his tail, everything closing in on him and drowning escape. He glanced everywhere, anywhere, panic striking him as the cold air from the Skrill's mouth blew over his head. He shot a look over the sleeping people, the axes and swords and hammers quiet and glistening by their sides. Where was a dragon slayer when you needed one?

He snarled at the blanketed mounds. Some blankets stirred, rolled over. The Timberjacks lifted from the masts, rose high into the cover of the black sky. He kept his eyes on Skari, the Skrill suddenly starting back and lifting his tail away from the deck as the snoring rhythm broke. Toothless growled. _Don't you touch me._ _Or you'll have the whole army shooting you full of arrows. Just what am I guilty of?_

Skari scowled, wrinkled his nose as he relaxed, surveying the people returning to stillness. _Let's not get violent Dagr. Not yet, at least. And funny that you should appeal to them - the humans are after you, not me. Didn't you wonder at all why they didn't kill you on sight? After every battle, they always spare the best dragon, the prize dragon. Spared to be hunted down on their island. Usually clip their wings to make the hunt, as they say, "fair." _Skari spat the last word with contempt, blue sparks crackling around his ruff of neck spikes. His little yellow eyes suddenly shot into Toothless.

But in your case they won't have to bother.

Toothless smarted, looked away from the Skrill. His throat dried suddenly and his ear flaps flattened against his skull. So that's where they were taking him. A hunt. He suddenly couldn't help but glance over at the blanketed mounds, his eyes riveting on the weapons lying at the ready beside each warrior's body. Glinting axes, swords, spears as long as his body, innumerable little arrows. He could outrun a sword, a spear, but those arrows. Or a flying axe head - he'd seen the sun-haired girl throwing her axe into trees, slicing precisely into the heart of the trunk. A shudder quivered through his chest, through his neck. He could smell his own fear pushing up his throat, breaking into his mind. Just what did they use on a hunt for the prize dragon?

He was suddenly aware of Skari's voice, realized the Skrill had been speaking all this time.

Your head will join the others mounted in their Hall. About thirty prize dragon heads. It's an elite group. Only the best are represented. You'll be the first of your species.

Toothless muttered quietly, more to himself than for reply. _A dubious honor._

And you'll be the first prize dragon I'll deliver into their hands.

Toothless bolted his head up, stared incredulously at Skari. _Isn't my being chased around by a bunch of blasted dragon killers enough revenge for you?_

Skari snapped his jaws, cocked his head down at him. _Aren't you forgetting you're a Night Fury? I know your species - and I know the human species. They may be stubbornly relentless to kill, but they're also downright stupid. Sometimes takes them a week, two weeks even, to bring down the smart ones. You, Dagr, are smart - you'll find a way to outwit them for a while, delay the inevitable. But you can't outwit me. We're the same class. I know how you fly, how you sleep, how you fight, how you hide, how you think. And I've waited sixty winters to see your blood, and I'm not gonna let some dimwitted humans delay it any longer._

The yellow eyes flashed away from him, the spiked wings unfolding as the Skrill shifted his balance on the mast. _See you on Herkja._

Toothless throatled sharply, quickly, at him, couldn't believe this was happening. _How can you hate me for ancient history? _He craned his head forward, pushing against the straps._ Sixty summers past! Okay, I know I helped my father fight yours, but I nearly got myself killed doing it, and now everybody's dead. I'd just as well never come to your island or met any of you - I never wanted this. Never wanted to put you in whatever misery I'm supposed to have caused you. _Toothless growled the last part, hated to plead mercy from this scum of a dragon, couldn't possibly imagine what sort of suffering he was responsible for worthy of the misery the Skrill was putting him through.

He started back as the Skrill whirled back at him and gurgled, clacked his teeth, his body heaving with the clicking of his jaws and his cold breath coming in bursts over Toothless' body. _You think this is only about that? It's not just that you helped kill my parents - you did more than that. You joined the other side. Our enemies for hundreds of years. You fraternized with the humans, revealed our secrets to them, became one of them. You're worse than a human - you left the dragon world for theirs. You're a traitor. Traitor to your species, traitor to my species, to all species. As the guardian of this island, it's my duty to kill traitors._

The deck heaved down as the spiked wings heaved and pumped into the air, streaking over the blackness of the sea and into the mosaic of the stars. He watched the sleek shadow, joining the other vast shadows of wings, already heading for the jag of land jutting just over the horizon. A cold wind shot through him as he watched the shadow, small and nimble like a Night Fury flashing past the lights of the heavens. He looked away.

He suddenly felt droplets drenching him, cold droplets over his scales, tickling his nose and filming over his ear flaps. Was the dawn dew already settling? No, the sun wasn't ready yet, not for a while now. It was the coldness of Skari's breath. Even the floorboards were coated, cold and wet. Cold breath, cold fire. He had felt that numbing blue lightning fire once. There weren't many dragons to have cold fire like the Skrill. Worked to their advantage. Nearly every dragon was fireproof, but hardly any could stand the numbing, electrocuting cold of the Skrill's lightning fire.

I'm not gonna die. The snarl shot out of his throat suddenly, startled him. He breathed, let his breaths out slowly, felt his back move up and down gently. Had to calm himself. Had to prepare. He'd

need all his senses alert and quick the moment the people released him to begin the hunt. Except there wouldn't just be people hunting him. Not just axes and swords and arrows and spears to worry about, but every dragon on Herkja. The Skrill had already recruited those Timberjacks - how many other dragons did he convince?

He clenched his jaw, shook his head in disgust. _Traitor, you called me. You're the one surrendering me over to those killers. What kind of a dragon are you? _His muscles tensed suddenly, his mind sparking at the phrase of the Skrill. Just how exactly did Skari plan on delivering him into human hands? A shiver shot through him, an image of himself dragged, a sharp feeling of teeth in his neck, cold fire numbing him.

All I did was befriend a human, Skari. And he's nothing like you think he is.

He moaned suddenly, felt a pain in his chest sharper than the piercing feeling in his neck, colder than the chilled droplets coating his scales and tickling his nose.

_Hiccup. _The image of the hair flopping over his eyes, little eyes looking up at him, big and round, innocent and furrowed with concern. Little mouth, open and questioning. Little hands, touching the side of his head, stroking his snout. _What if you never saw me again, Hiccup? _He swallowed tightly, hated to admit it, but it was a distinct possibility. No, not possible, more than probable. He preferred to consider the brighter side of things, but even he couldn't think of a better outcome for his dilemma. He was grounded, cornered, trapped between the humans and the dragons, and one of them was bound to get him. He'd try his blasted best to outrun them, to outfight them, but what if his best wasn't good enough? He shut tight his eyes, couldn't imagine, couldn't bear, the pain he'd cause that boy if he never came back alive. _No_, he shot out at the black sky, chafing at the leather, snorting and heaving. _I'm gonna fight. I'm gonna make it. Skari thinks he's so smart - he couldn't find me for sixty summers. I'm a Night Fury - people have been trying to bring me down for hundreds of years but couldn't. Only one time, only Hiccup could do it. _He stopped his chafing, held still a moment, just feeling the rhythm of his beating chest.

_Hiccup, _he breathed the name slowly, clearly, into the shining pattern of stars. _Can you live without me?_

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Something warm and hot shot into his chest, making Hiccup heave a breath as faint sounds started to reach his ears.

"Today of all days-"

"Stoick, ya know that's probably what 'e planned."

"Of course I know. Induction Day, _my_ Induction Day way back then, and now Hiccup's. What do you _think_ is making me so mad? I should have known-"

"Ya can't have known."

"He's my brother, Gobber."

"Not anymore, he ain't."

"That doesn't change anything; I should never have bought that trick of peace he dangled on me.

The voices were far away, someplace. . .

Hiccup felt himself inhale, consciousness slowly awakening in his brain. He grunted, felt the cool flow of breath into his lungs, the spark of pain again, in his shoulder, somewhere slowly throbbing in him.

"And they left because. . ." It was Gobber, he finally recognized the voice.

"Rune's not leaving. I don't think he'll leave for good." His father.

Hiccup flicked open his eyes, realized the voices were coming from downstairs. _Downstairs_, and he was on his bed, a blanket on him. He mushed it with his right hand. Two, maybe three blankets. He should have felt warm, but chills ran down his body and made his teeth chatter suddenly. His head burned and pressed into his eyes, and the light glowing down on the room was suddenly harsh, even the soft candlelight flushing out the darkness of the night.

Night already. . .

What day was it, anyway?

Induction Day, the day he turned eighteen, became a man.

He swallowed, felt terribly dry, tried to push thoughts into the mushy warmth in his head.

"Shush, you guys," came a new voice. His eye lids flickered, he could place it. _Just give me a minute. . ._

"You'll wake him up," the voice snapped again.

"I'm sorry, Astrid." Gobber.

That was it. He gulped a breath. _Astrid_. The last he remembered it was morning, and she was-

He steadied his nerves, suddenly remembering snatches of what happened. "Okay. . ." he whispered, closing his eyes and thinking about his breathing for a moment. He saw the glinting sword again, her harsh knees on his arms. . . and Astrid, the sheer horror in her face. . . He opened his eyes, sucked in air, pulled the blankets closer to him, his left arm oddly refusing to move.

"You're up!"

It was Astrid. He turned his head her way, saw her stepping up from the stairs to his room. She looked. . . horrible, he suddenly realized. Her braid was a mess, the fur on her boots was tangled and dirty, and her face, stains of brown, and her eyes tired and red. Smears of red smudged her clothes and skirt. Most of it, crusty and

dry now. She was carrying a bucket, the contents sloshing as she stepped forward, her eyes suddenly creasing as she looked at him.

He tried to say her name, cleared his throat and realized he was dry. "Astrid." It came out as a whisper.

She plopped the bucket down on the side of his bed, pulled up the chair that was sitting beside it. She sat in it, put a hand on his right arm that was resting by his side. "Hiccup," she breathed, laying her other hand on his forehead.

He inhaled sharply, closed his eyes, her hand cold on his head.

"You're still too warm," she hummed and suddenly something splashed somewhere and a damp, warm something sloshed over his forehead. His eyes opened suddenly and he took another careful breath, felt her sponging his face, gently.

His father's voice came rumbling behind her. "Hiccup-"

He swallowed again, tried to get some moisture in his throat. "Hi. . . Dad."

"Are you feeling - all right?" There was a genuine concern in his big, strong voice.

"I- I'm fine," he stammered, not really thinking about the question. "What, uh, happened?" He tried to get a grip on his situation, looked around his room again, the glow from the candle shading everything in deep golds and browns. In front of him, the stone slab, cold, wide, sat suddenly very empty. _Toothless_. His jaw locked for a moment. "What's happened to Toothless?" he gasped. He pictured the ship again, Toothless strapped on it, like two years ago. Instead now, on this foreign ship, unknown and- And the stirrup gone. . . Heather. She probably flew him out that night, lured him out somehow and took him, for what? Why? Some prize thing they'd hunt down, some-

"Hiccup, calm down!"

He glanced up, saw Astrid over him, her arms holding him down. "What did I do?" he stammered, leaning back suddenly into his pillow.

"You're panicking, didn't you see yourself?" She let him go, slapped the moist fabric on his forehead again. He gasped at the splash of warm water.

"You need to rest," she said, firmly. "The healer said you _need_ to rest." She stared at him pointedly, a will in her that he often only saw in hot competition and battle. She put up her fingers, counted off. "You're chilled, you're weak, you're breathing fast. It's _not_ a good thing. You still could _die_."

He flinched.

"So you sit there and don't do a dragon-blasting thing." She eyed him critically.

"I- I'm okay, Astrid," he said, choking on the words suddenly as a cough struck him, shook him.

"Yeah, very okay." She smirked at him.

He swallowed, almost wanted to poke some other jab of sarcasm, but the thought of Toothless got him again and that rising feeling in his nerves crawled up his spine. He groaned. He had no idea what was going on with Toothless; the last he saw him, he was captured. "We got to save Toothless."

"That's goin' to be a tad difficult, I'd say."

Hiccup turned to the entrance again, saw Gobber hobbling up into his room, emerging from the shadow of the corner of the house.

"The ships all left hours ago, and the dragons-" Gobber whistled, a low, sad whistle, and a sigh. "It makes a grown man cry, I swear."

The massacre. He remembered Astrid telling him. He shut his eyes a minute, let the fact sink in. The horrible fact. Hours ago? He cursed the sleep he's been lost in. "We can still get to Toothless." He didn't want to let that picture of his dragon in bondage get to his nerves again. Astrid was right; he couldn't let the panic get him. He needed to keep together. "Can't we still catch up to them?"

"With _what?_" Gobber jabbed his crook of a hand out towards the window. "Our whole fleet is crumblin' under our very eyes as we speak, and the dragons - my mother's memory. . . they've gone through so much already. Did ye see the size of that Skirra VÃ©llite lot? Stoick will tell ya."

"Dad?" Hiccup glanced up at him, desperate suddenly.

His father motioned to Astrid and Gobber. "I need to talk to my son," he said, simply, slowly, his demeanor detached from the conversation, it seemed. Odd, _I should have been watching._ His heart started racing now, the unconscious panic for Toothless, he figured, and he leaned back, tried to calm himself, think clearly. Astrid rose reluctantly, squeezed the fingers of Hiccup's left hand before stepping out. Gobber grumbled something hot and angry as he descended, his wooden leg clapping on the steps.

His father turned back to him, scooted into the chair next to his bed.

"What about Toothless?" Hiccup asked. His father sighed, shifted his weight on the little seat. "Like Gobber said, we can't help him now."

Impossible.

"The ships are long gone."

"Dad, it's _not_ too late."

"Listen, son." Stoick latched his eyes on him, put his hand out pointedly. "You haven't seen the damage outside-"

"Is it too much to spare one ship."

"It's not about one ship, Hiccup."

"Aargh-" he gasped, irritated.

"They crippled us, they've crippled our dragons, they still have so many ships. We can't afford to go chasing them now. We need to get our fleet together, we need to cure our dragons. Half of them are incapacitated, either dead or traumatized. You need to be there to get them back to their senses. We might even have to train a lot of new ones. It's just not easy."

Hiccup lisped a hot breath, felt his lips press together in anger. His heart was heaving heavy now, and he knew it was giving his body too much stress, for his condition, but. . . "I'll go out and look for Toothless myself, then."

His father jolted up, the light from the candle slanting over his features.

"I'm serious," Hiccup snapped.

"And what will you chase them on? One of the broken ships?" His voice got thick. "You're in no condition to go flying."

"I did it before." Hiccup clenched his fist. "I can do it again."

"Hiccup, you're not doing that."

"I am, Dad."

Stoick slapped his hand on the boards of the bed. "You're not well, son."

"Says who?"

"You've been stabbed, that's not a light issue."

"I lost a leg, I think I can handle this just fine." Hiccup inhaled, felt his throat dry again. The fever, probably. He grimaced.

"Hiccup." His father's voice was firm, hard, like when he used to berate him every night for leaving the house to kill dragons. "I'm not letting you run off on some suicide mission."

"What do you think this is for Toothless? He's going to die, out there, if they get their way. I'm not letting that happen."

"Hiccup-"

"Stabbed or not stabbed, I'm going after him." He flapped the blankets off of him, swung a leg over-

"Hiccup!" Stoick put his hands heavily on Hiccup's arms, pushed him back into the bed. Hiccup gasped and stared at him, looked into his father's round green eyes. He felt a hot steam coming out of his own

chest, something angry, defiant.

"Hiccup, if you fail. . ."

"I won't fail."

"I'm serious, Hiccup."

"_I'm_ serious."

"Hiccup, _listen to me_." His father pushed his hands into Hiccup's arms for emphasis, let go and sighed irritably. "These people are not just any rogue villains. They won't let you get away that easily. They tried to kill you once, if he sees you alive now - you won't make it out next time."

Hiccup lashed his head to the side, exasperated. "And what's this thing they have against _me?_"

Stoick rustled up a paper from his belt, threw it on Hiccup's chest.

Hiccup inhaled sharply, didn't have to read the words.

_You should have killed him when you had the chance. . . _

He peered up at his father, the big eyes glaring down at the blood-stained note.

"They tried to kill you first, didn't they, before they started the war?" His father's voice was grave.

Hiccup stared down at the note, the presence of it on his chest throwing his mind into convulsions. He gasped a breath. "It was Heather," he breathed, calming himself, stopped the visions of her over him, the slanted light from the moonlight, the sword- So they tried to get him first?

First. . .

He looked up at his father. "What did I ever do?"

Stoick sighed. "There's something I should have told you a long time ago. . ." He snapped out of his musing and tapped the paper suddenly. "You know they left this on you?"

"I _know_, Dad." He tried not to sound irked. "I was there, remember?"

His father did not catch the joke, mumbled as he read the note, silently. "It's true, though, I could have," he said, gruff and hard, suddenly, almost cracked. It was a change. . . a strange, sudden change. Hiccup swallowed, an odd fear brushing through him.

"And that's what's irritating Rune, I see now."

Hiccup licked his chapped lips. "Uh, what . . . do you mean?" He stared at his father, tensely.

"Rune hasn't forgotten the fact that Valla's gone. I guess he's never

forgiven me for taking her, and he'll never forgive the fact that she died trying to save the runt of the tribe." Stoick flicked the paper from off Hiccup's chest, crumpled it in hot anger.

Hiccup blinked. ". . . me?" This was something different, not the story of his mother's death that he'd been told before. She was supposed to have died in some illness. Not. . . "What does that mean, Dad?" He cleared his dry throat suddenly, felt that strange sensation in him again, that cautious fear.

His father took a deep, heavy breath, his frame shivering thickly. He looked Hiccup in the eyes. Hiccup cringed down, inhaled. "Son, I never told you this. . . but . . ." He cleared his throat. "You know what we do with unwanted offspring. . ."

Hiccup blinked, his heart thumped suddenly, thick and heavy. His father's eyes were steady on him, and something horrible, terribly unthinkable starting pushing into Hiccup's mind.

Stoick looked away suddenly, pursed his lips. "Valla went out in the morning afterwards and found you, still alive on the hillside."

The breath left him.

He felt very pale suddenly.

He wasn't lying, was he? Of course he wasn't, why would he? He was the runt, he never doubted that, but to this extent. . . to, to. . . He inhaled, feeling suddenly very weak, his breath shivering. His father wasn't looking at him anymore, was mulling his eyes towards Hiccup's hands resting on the blankets. "Your birth was supposed to be a month later," the big man whispered. "You were so weak, so _small_. How you made it out of that night alive is just- You're not supposed to live, but she. . . she wanted to save you."

Hiccup desperately cleared his throat, croaked out a mumble. ". . . how? How could this. . ."

_Dad wanted me to die. . . _

Stoick continued talking. Hiccup tried to keep up with the meaning of the words he was hearing. Something about an illness, his mother, the sickness going around the village. Stuff he heard before. "She was too weak to nurse a child."

Hiccup fingered the blankets suddenly, couldn't look at his father anymore.

"She only got weaker, taking care of you. We tried to help, but. . ."

He sighed heavily. "It was too late by then. She died a month later."

Hiccup swallowed, didn't think there was any saliva left to do it with in his dry throat. _Why didn't you tell me this before. . .? How could you. . . _

"Rune came back a year after we banished him, found out she was gone because of you. He was angry. Angry that we banished him months before, angry that. . . Gobber told you about the competition? For Valla, on my Induction Day."

Hiccup nodded tensely. That love triangle of his Dad and Rune and his mother. . .

A lump formed in his throat. _How could you think of just letting me die. . . _

"I would have lost in that competition." Stoick said suddenly, taking a deep, dense breath. "But I only swam halfway to Odin's Point before I turned back."

Hiccup crossed his brows, couldn't get his mind off the fact that he, _his own father_ could think of such a thing. All those years he'd hated him, since the beginning. . . His father's voice was still there, talking. ". . . Rune knew what I'd done, but no one believed him. I wouldn't let them." Hiccup blinked, tried to focus again, felt the throb in his side again. Okay, so his father was talking about that competition thing Gobber had told him about. So now. . . it was cheating? To win his mother. . . There was a sudden, increasingly disgusted feeling inside him and he cringed, turned to the left slightly, as much as he dared with his injury, away from Stoick. His father kept still talking, details like how he'd made sure Rune was blamed for the outburst, banished for trying to murder him.

_Don't talk about murder to me. . . _

. . . how Valla really did love him, but Rune just would never get it. A year after Induction, he'd come back looking for Valla, learned the truth and put a curse on Stoick, and on his children. And now Rune was probably out to avenge Valla somehow, get back on what he'd done to him at Induction. Stoick breathed out, sighed, and stopped talking suddenly. He patted Hiccup's arm. A horrible, disgusted feeling rushed up inside him and Hiccup pulled away, lisping something.

"Hiccup?"

He breathed hard suddenly, looked away from Stoick, avoided his eyes.

"That's why I can't let you go anywhere near the Skirra VÃ©l."

Toothless. So that's what this story was for, to keep him from getting to Toothless? He didn't say anything, kept staring at his desk on the other side of the room.

"You understand what I'm saying? He'll kill you."

Hiccup licked his lips, looked down at his father's hand next to him. "I guess that's nothing new," he whispered.

Stoick maybe sensed something, pulled his hand away. "That was all in the past."

"Then why didn't you tell me before."

The big man was quiet, turned away from looking at him. Hiccup watched him, waited for some kind of answer. He watched him breathe, large heavy breaths that made his shoulders rise and fall, the face

hidden away in that big beard, his eyes small and downcast, sad. Regret, maybe?

Stoick never regretted anything.

"You're not going to try and save Toothless, are you?" Hiccup ventured quietly, knew almost the answer.

"There's not enough resources to engage in another battle."

Hiccup swallowed. "I'm going after him."

"Hiccup, we went through all that already. A sick, feeble boy is no match against an army of vengeful warriors."

Hiccup flinched, felt the sparked hum of pain in his shoulder again. He could still fly a dragon, and this - he peered over at the stained bandage on his shoulder - this wasn't going to stop him.

"That's not the point, right now," Stoick hummed, a thin edge of anger in his voice. "We have to get our resources together, and then go after Rune. We were surprised today, we can't go into war unprepared again. You understand that?" He looked at Hiccup closely.

Hiccup kept the stare, then turned away, and said nothing.

Stoick rose suddenly. "I'll let Astrid take care of you now. I have a war to run."

Hiccup didn't look back, stared at the desk, listened to him creak out of his room, down the stairs. He said something quiet to someone downstairs, Hiccup couldn't tell if it was hard or sympathetic, angry or maybe just flat and uncaring.

Did it matter?

A little gasp and the clap of small feet met his ears suddenly and he turned over to his right, saw her running up the steps, the cloth in one hand, a mug in the other, and. . . She looked different now. He leaned back, blinked. She'd thrown some water on her hair, smoothed out the crinkles in the braid, and her skirt, the red stains had been washed off and a gleam of moisture glistened on the leather. She stood there a moment, and he imagined the faintest of smiles on her lips, and for a moment he thought he was happy.

But not for long. _Toothless_. . .

She bent down to him, a hard determination in her eyes, her hands busy around him. She asked him if he was still cold.

"He doesn't want me to go after Toothless, Astrid."

She patted his head with the cloth. "I asked, are you cold?"

"Didn't you hear me?"

She pulled back, flapped the moist cloth on the bed next to his arm, a quiet irritation in her movement.

"I said I'm going out anyway. By myself, if it comes to that."

She looked at him, inhaled and looked away. "I know we have to save Toothless, but . . ." She put a palm on his forehead. He hissed in a breath, felt her fingers cold, suddenly very cold on his skin. "Hiccup, you're not in any condition to do anything heroic."

"I'm not trying to be a hero."

"Well, what would you call running out after Toothless alone?"

"Astrid, you sound just like him."

"Your dad's got a point."

My Dad. . . His breath suddenly got heavy and he pursed his lips. Would it matter if he told her now? It wouldn't fix anything. .

"Hiccup, what's the matter?"

He blinked, looked up at her. She was eyeing him critically.

"Besides Toothless?" he sighed.

Her look melded into concern.

"Aaah." He flumped another heavy sigh. "Apparently I killed my mom, and Rune and the rest of them are going after me - and my father. It doesn't make sense, Astrid. I just. . ." He swallowed. "Did you know I was supposed to be killed?"

She pursed her lips. "I guess they tried." She pointed to his shoulder.

"No, no, not that. Ugh!" He inhaled. This wasn't coming out right. He put his right hand to his forehead, tried to get his thoughts into something sensible. "Astrid, he just told me that he didn't want me, from the beginning. I don't know how to say this. . . They left me on some hillside to die, and I guess my mother took pity and saved me. I-"

She was looking at him incredulously now, a splash of shock on her face.

"That's what he just told me." He sighed. It was hard calling him Dad right now, he couldn't explain the feeling. He pursed his lips. "I guess taking care of me was the death of her, and now Rune's mad because she's gone." He closed his eyes and breathed out, exhausted. "It's crazy. . ."

A hand rubbed his right shoulder, suddenly, gently.

His mouth felt dry again and he licked his lips, opened his eyes and watched her face, thoughts running fast behind her eyes. "I didn't know that," she hummed.

"He never told me before."

She pulled her hand from him, reached out and took the mug from the bed stand. "You better drink something, Hiccup, if you want to help Toothless." She nudged the mug up near his lips.

He took her wrist, kept the mug from coming closer. "You mean that?"

She looked down, put her other hand on his. "I don't want to."

"What does that mean?" He let her hand go.

She took his head in her other hand, brought the lip of the cup to his mouth. "Just drink something, Hiccup, I don't know what I'm thinking. It's crazy."

The water sloshed up his mouth, felt cool and refreshing in his throat. He gulped it down and she brought the cup away. "You know I can't leave Toothless," he said.

"But I know you can't just go killing yourself trying to get to him, either."

"What if there's no other option?"

"Are there, really?"

Hiccup sighed, got a spasm of chills and brought the blanket closer to him. "He doesn't want to go after Toothless, and I don't know how long it'll take for him to get ready - or if it won't be too late by that time."

Astrid patted his chest lightly. "All I know is that you're not risking your life, and you're going to rest. I won't have you dying, whatever you do."

She brought the cup up to his mouth again, pushed it up his lips. He took it, let the water mingle in his mouth, slip under his tongue.

He didn't want to tell her yet, not exactly. When everyone was asleep, maybe, if they would sleep that night, he was going to get out there and save Toothless. He could follow the ships, it wouldn't be that hard. Sure, he'd be risking a lot, and maybe he needed to think about it more. And if his father was right and they were out to enact some insane revenge, well. . . He sighed. _If Dad could keep secrets as big as that, surely I can_. Leave Berk, on his ship or on a dragon, it didn't matter. And would he care? Probably not. But. . .

Whatever happened, he was going to get to Toothless, somehow

15. Chapter 13: Search Over the Sea

a/n: A day (or two late) - aaahhhh, I'm so sorry. The muse was being a bad dragon, a very bad dragon. XD Hope you enjoy this anyway. I need to crawl over to my other responsibilities and take care of unread emails and messages and a score of other things *phew* >And a special message to Teen Nightfury, who left an

awesome review a couple weeks ago that I couldn't respond to because s/he's on Anon: I love long reviews, so no worries there and yes! We are Christian, my sister and I. We so very much appreciated your review! Hope you keep reading and loving our little story!

View the illustration at the official webpage. Put a period where the dashes are: howtotrainyourdragon2 - thecomicseries - com
>or at my deviantArt gallery: inhonoredglory - deviantart - gallery - 38855965<p>

* * *

><p>How to Train Your Dragon II
>The Dragon Whisperer

**Act II
>A World Shattered
**

**Chapter 13
>Search Over the Sea

It was night, and she was asleep.

At last.

He squeezed shut his eyes, opened them, blinked in the growing mist of the moisture in the air, the sticky prelude of another storm. Stoick was somewhere else, tending to the village, the dragons. He could sometimes hear his big voice shouting in the distance, like a leader in the darkness. He wouldn't be home that night, he heard him say. There was just too much to do. Hiccup was glad about that. Less impediments to his plan.

And then Astrid . . . she was there next to him, asleep by now, her back bent over the side of his bed, her head on her arm, the moist cloth still in her hand. He sighed, could still feel her hand on his forehead, constantly checking him, and the warm water she dabbed on his chest and head. She'd gone out earlier, reported that the damage was much worse than he thought. Stormfly was okay, thankfully, she'd told him that. But the arrow wound would incapacitate her for a week, at least. The same with Hookfang. They both needed major recuperation. "Like you," she'd said, with a hint of purpose in her voice.

Astrid, do you want me to save Toothless?

He wasn't really sure. She seemed to dodge the question whenever he tried to bring it up that evening. Which is why he couldn't risk telling any of them - the kids, his father, Gobber - about what he was planning to do. He hated to do it, hated to keep them, _her_ in the dark, but . . . She was worried about him too much. And not enough about Toothless. Of course she said he might die trying something, _anything_ to save Toothless.

So?

There were only two options - doing nothing or doing something. And he wasn't going with the first option, that much he knew. And he'd rested quite enough, didn't he? He tested his own forehead, couldn't tell if he'd improved or not, decided that he had and slipped the

blankets off of himself, careful not to wake her. _It's not that cold_, he hummed, pushing down the chattered feelings nipping inside of him. He cursed his condition, inhaled slowly, carefully. He can make it, _I can make it_. _I have to._

He set his foot gently on the ground, grateful they hadn't taken off his prosthetic before putting him to bed. One extra step he didn't have to take now. He put both feet on the ground, sat at the edge of his bed, looked back at her.

He wanted to bring a hand over her head, over the blonde curls glinting in the moonlight from the cracks in the paneled window above. He'd watched her sleeping before - out when they went camping together once a couple months ago, and they'd decided not to head home for once, just rubbed out a place in the grass and watched the stars come out. He didn't dare sleep before her, he wanted to see what she looked like still and quiet. She was so beautiful angry, even more beautiful in the placid calm of sleep. He hated to leave her, here in the dark. But it was this very thing that would keep him here, that would make her beg him to stay. He figured that out about her, with that whole jealousy mess. He smiled. But Toothless needed him, more than anything right now, certainly more than she needed him. He inhaled, stepped up, and made his way to his desk. If any of them came in and saw him out, doing something, that would be the end of him. He fumbled quickly through the stuff, the papers and doodads on the desk. He kept telling himself he had to clean up this place, get it organized better. Man, there wasn't any time in his life, not with the Academy and Induction training and-

Induction training. He smiled, a small ridiculous smile of strange amusement.

I guess that's not happening anymore.

His smile faded into a dark sorrow. "Oh, Toothless," he breathed and closed his eyes, put a hand on his face and his elbow on the table. "Please be okay," he whispered. "Don't be afraid, I'm coming for you, bud. Just . . . hang on . . ." He inhaled, opened his eyes and looked out at his desk again, a whirl of purpose and what he figured was adrenaline pumping through him. Good, that was good. He needed that. Might be the only thing keeping him through this journey. It was going to be a long one. Astrid mentioned the direction the ships had gone, and how it must be a long ways off, if the Hooligans never came upon their island - Herkja, it was - before now.

He was going to be needing a lot of supplies.

He swallowed, got some moisture in his throat, and reached for the knapsack in the cubby hole of the table. Silently. He threw one of his spyglasses into it, dashed in a roll of ropes, just in case . . . who knows? He fingered the tiny contraption he'd made, the one with the hovering bar of metal - that weird metal that kept pointing left of the sunrise - and threw it into the bag. And then the little ticking contraption. He spent ages on it, and it didn't really have a purpose, but the regularity of its tick-tock fascinated him, and he figured once he added markers, it might make a good time-telling device. Stoick was not amused.

_But then he's never amused . . . _

He sighed, threw it into the bag, looked back suddenly and checked that she was still asleep. He flipped through his papers, looking for something that might be of help. He found an empty paper, picked up his charcoal and wrote a note out to her, rolled it in his hand, suddenly realized . . . hmm. Something was odd. He ruffled through the papers again, finally realized it.

She'd taken the plans for his ship, his metal ship.

He shook his head. As if taking Toothless and killing him weren't enough for them. What did they think of doing? Making . . .

Metal ships.

He breathed in. If they got that done, Berk's doomed. He shook his head. It only worked with that metal on Dragon Island. _I mean, I never tried it on anything else, but . . ._ It wasn't a good sign, no matter which way you looked at it. He flipped back the papers, couldn't think of it right now. It would take them a couple days at most to even figure out his plans. He didn't exactly write them as anything readable except to himself, so . . . maybe his shorthand would throw them off for a while. And then there was the thing about the metal itself . . . well, he'd hope for the best. It wasn't exactly something in his immediate control right now.

He'd have to get food - blankets and tent material maybe. He had a funny feeling he wasn't going to be able to get to any dragons. His father had them all collected in the village, arranging them for war, or in the Academy, caring for them. He'd heard that already. There'd be too many people, out to get him back in bed. At least his _Night Fury_ was still in that hidden spot he'd beached it at because of that spat with Astrid. Man, that was ages ago. He breathed in, looked for things on his desk.

The Academy was probably a hospital now, he suddenly thought. He swallowed, suddenly felt very guilty, leaving them all like that.

They needed him here.

He pursed his lips and his fingers brushed by a sketchbook on the table. He knew which one it was, that one he drew Toothless in at the beginning. _Don't do this to me. . . _

Of course he had to go. The kids were here, the rest of the village. It's not like he was the _only_ one who could deal with dragons. And who was going to go after Toothless? Everyone would think it was crazy, and that was the plain truth - crazy to do something so unprepared. He turned from the table, took the sketchbook for some reason, started for the stairs. He was an idiot, he knew, being ridiculously stupid right now. He stuffed his blankets and some spare clothing into the sack, threw in a roll of fabric for his injury, slipped on a new vest, two of them, just for good measure.

Stupid, really stupid.

But smart wasn't going to help Toothless, so . . .

He stepped back, watched Astrid's sleeping figure breathing there, gently, unknowingly next to his bed. He unrolled the paper from his

hand, placed it carefully in front of her, pursed his lips and turned away.

He stepped down the stairs, quietly, was grateful that he wasn't feeling cold or weak or nauseous right now. It probably would all hit him on the ship, he figured. Just as well. At least he'd be out there already, and there won't be any turning back. He reached the end of the stairs, adjusted his eyes to the darkness of the lower room from the moonlight of his room. He slung the sack over his right shoulder and winced as he unintentionally stretched his left side. He'd have to learn to live with that. It won't be that hard. He snuck over to where the food was kept, grabbed a couple dried things and a couple sealed skins of water. There was still a good bit of wind outside, probably another storm coming. He could get more water from the rain. The finality of what he was doing hit him suddenly and he paused just at the doorway of the back door. The chills came back and he shivered, wrapped his vest around him tighter.

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Do it again, Toothless was shrieking, pumping his wings, roaring across the spinning expanse of blue and white and blinding light. _Come on Hiccup, flip the stirrup harder!_ He jerked his head back, tried to spy through the flap of red hair into the face underneath. A big grin staring back at him and a sudden whoop. "Okay, bud, but don't blame me if you get winded." _Ha! That'll never happen,_ Toothless throated back. His tailfin suddenly flicked, he slicked his wings against his hot breathing sides as the familiar little legs tightened beside him and the small body crouched against his neck as the wind shot through them and the mountain peaks screamed past them. He flattened his ear flaps against his head, narrowed his eyes, aimed for the ships far but fast approaching below, the dirty, blackened, barnacled, crusted, decaying ships. Those ships. A savage growl escaped him. _Let's blast them. Blast every one of them._ "No Toothless." The familiar voice, elation gone, firm and urgent now. _But what they did to you- _"No, we can't, it wouldn't be-" The voice trailed off; he was getting exasperated with it. _Come on Hiccup, our chance is flying away. It's us or them, them or us, Hiccup, don't you hear, listen to me . . . _

Voices sparked in his mind, grew louder, more boisterous. From the left side. Different voices. _Just shut up._

_Wait- _Toothless jerked his eyes open, nudged his head up, suddenly found his head had been resting on his feet and his whole body slack on the deck. It was just a dream. Hard orange light slanted across the wooden floorboards, armored humans bustled about the deck where quiet mounds of blankets had been the night before. A gritty ash wafted past the mast of the ship, wafting down thickly from a gritty gray sky, the smell of sulfur pungent and biting. The sun's light fought through the blanket of ash, slanting hard and brilliant through the volcanic fog in shafts of flameless fire. The dawn was imminent.

He jerked up to his feet, a fire welling up in his throat, parching him. He glanced around among the people, searching, crazily hoping, but in vain. Of course not. There was no way possible. The last place Hiccup would be was on this ship.

He snorted, tried swallowing to relieve the dryness in his throat.

Dreams, he mused. The real ones were the worst. He attempted to yawn, to stretch his legs, his wings, just a little, but all the straps and cords and aches and cramps came shouting back at him from all sides as every nudge he made in any direction met with tight resistance. A sudden numbing sting shot from his tail as he jerked it. He could feel the crates almost tipping, yet not enough. They were still on him. He wasn't even sure if he could feel the end of his tail. He grunted, edged his mouth open, just wanted to bare his teeth at the straps, but couldn't.

_Go ahead and complain Toothless. _Hiccup was probably going through just as much. Toothless stared down at the molding floorboards. _Hiccup_. What was he doing now? He hated not knowing where his best friend was. Even when Hiccup snuck away from the village during stressful days at the Academy, when nobody, not even Astrid or Stoick, knew where he'd gone, he'd always set off with him by his side, both conspiring in whatever fun or mischief they had planned. Sometimes they escaped for an entire day, snuck back to the cove, splashed each other underneath the waterfall. The longest they'd been apart was those three days on that winter a year ago, those days he regretted for even thinking he could live without the boy. And then in the Hall, as Hiccup cradled his chin in both his palms, he made him a promise, a promise he knew the kid couldn't hear, anyway, but swore to keep nonetheless. _I will never leave you._

So what about that promise now?

Toothless suddenly focused his eyes on the deck, flexed his wings underneath the straps. _I'll escape. If not here, then on the island._ His glance crept to the side of the ship, across the vast expanse of sea clouded in ash and cluttered with ships. He'd figure out how to fly over that hurdle when he got there. For now, concentrate. Watch these people. He scanned the deck, observed the gossiping warriors clustered together around semi-circles of crates as sudden hot smells wafted from the things in their hands and mouths. Some of the hands flicked stuff over the edge of the ship, into the waves, which the wandering water dragons scavenged as the stuff hit the water. Toothless flared his nostrils, felt a pang in his stomach as he recognized the scents one by one. _Cod. Mackerel. Salmon._ Those words Hiccup voiced whenever he fed him. The pang in his stomach rumbled again. On most days at this time, he'd be diving into a nice big pile of fish in the downstairs room next to the table. _Hiccup always got my breakfast first . . . _Before he even sat down with his father for his own.

He shook his head, tried to yawn again, the mouth strap suddenly clamping his jaws taut. He growled, irritated, clawed the ground-

Skari said you were captured.

Toothless whirled. The hum came from below someplace, over the side of the ship.

_You're not the one who shot down that monster dragon? _The smaller hum was pointed, questioning. Toothless glanced out, saw the water dragons assembled near the side of the ship, lolling in the waves, lapping the debris thrown out by the humans, eyes bright and yellow and curious. Their bodies were lined with glowing specks, their eyes glowing even brighter as they stared amusedly at him. Scavenger

Swordtails.

Toothless grumbled, was in no mood to gab about old times when he and Hiccup shot that volcano dragon out of the sky. _What's it to you?_ he hissed through his mouth strap.

You're caught now, aren't you? The one dragon eyed him with a smirk.

My questions stands. Toothless growled, leaning his head in towards them.

Skari came back from Berk with all the details, about you and the monster dragon and the- The thin dragon spat a glob of oil into the water. _And that human_. He sniffed and licked his tongue across his narrow snout. Toothless narrowed his eyes at him, did not appreciate that attitude. Did Skari tell them about the so-called traitorousness of his actions over the past two years? Someone like him would_.

We thought you were something fabulous. The water dragon purred. _Now look at you._

Toothless snapped his jaws, hard to do in the bounds. The straps of leather that only seemed to prove that horrid little dragon's point. He hissed, a loud dragon's curse at them, snapped his head back and glared.

And to think - that Ormarr would even think of caring for you.

You shut up about Ormarr.

We'll tell him about you now, weak and helpless, nothing like the great Night Fury he kept telling us about.

Toothless lashed his head, as best he could. He didn't care about these creatures' opinion, knew Ormarr was not stupid enough to believe them, but . . . _Go ahead and tell Ormarr. _ . . . but maybe they'd tell him and maybe he'd blast this fleet out of the water, and get him out of here. He hated to ask for help, knew he could escape when they got the cursed bonds off of him, but what fool was he not to sneak in a little assistance? The little school of water dragons, the main one talking to him, snuck off into the ocean, lilted of smirking spite on his lips. Toothless hated to let that go, to see that succeed. That was the thing about the water dragons. They hated his kind, his flying kind, and his kind hated them. It wasn't something he regretted right now.

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She blinked her eyes open. Her face was on the edge of his bed, her arm under her head. She hummed pleasantly, feeling comfortable, rested, maybe a little stiff with her back bending over like that all night, but refreshed nonetheless. It was an insane day, the battle, the injuries, all the dragons. It made her suddenly sick to her stomach and she jolted upright. "Hiccup-" she instinctively said, opened her eyes and suddenly, suddenly-

"Hiccup!"

The boy wasn't there. The blankets weren't there. Her head jolted up, around the room. Where had he gone, curse him. He was in no condition to go traipsing around. What was she here for anyway? To- to sit and do nothing? She could just as easily get his breakfast and-

Her eye alighted on a paper suddenly on the bare wood panels of the bed. She grabbed it quickly; she could recognize his handwriting anywhere.

I'm okay, Astrid. Don't worry about me. Just left to find Toothless. Take care of the dragons for me, I'll be back as soon as I get him.

Hiccup

She pursed her lips and hissed a curse. That crazy kid . . . He'd been prodding her about that all evening, she never dreamed he'd just go off and do something so stupid. She turned the paper around, wondered suddenly how long ago this was, or how he planned on leaving Berk. It was morning now. She looked at the window, the window that they'd blocked up because of the storm, but through the cracks, she could feel the wind pushing through. The storm was kicking up again, sharp and livid in the air. She suddenly stepped to his desk, her fingers rifling past the scattered papers and curling behind the stands of clay pots holding brushes, searching, finally finding, the little tubular object he'd made. The spyglass. She'll need that, before the storm got so bad to block out the view of the sea.

She whirled around, headed down the stairs. Stoick was still not in - he probably never got in, really, and Hiccup wasn't anywhere in sight. If that note was right, he was probably out at sea someplace, either killing himself on a dragon or killing himself on a ship. She burst out of the house, shocked at the blast of cold, unfeeling air that hit her - and the murky fog of ash drifting in her face. Much more ash than last night, that's for sure. How could that volcano all the way from Dragon Island be throwing this much stuff over here? It must have belched out something in the night. She waved her hand in front of her, irritated. Someone was walking slowly, exhaustedly by, and she accosted him quickly.

"Have you seen Hiccup?"

The weary eyes - of Sven, she realized - blinked at her, dumbfounded. "No, Astrid," he said, gravely, and pulled out of her grasp. "I need some sleep right now. Find your dragon trainer for me, okay?"

There was a bitterness in that voice, a terrible, haunting bitterness. Was it that bad? She whirled, faced the wind and swirls of dust and ash in the air. Upwards, the sky was black and heavy, dark on the horizon, sparks of lightning already in the clouds far above, and the ocean, already rippling to the vibrations of the wind. Maybe he didn't get out that far, maybe he came back and realized how ridiculous it was what he was doing.

But somehow that seemed oddly unlikely; she knew Hiccup too well, and if he said he was going to do something, he wouldn't go back on his word. She pursed her lips, raced down towards the Academy, didn't know why, just had a hope against hope that he was there, taking care of the sick dragons and not doing whatever his note claimed. "Hey!"

she screamed. "Any of you seen Hiccup?"

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"Are you sure Stormfly can't do it?"

"No, Astrid, it's gonna be a good week or maybe two, before she can get on her feet -er, her wings again. And in this storm, no, nope, I'm sorry, she needs to rest."

Astrid sighed, slapped her fist against her thigh. Gobber was right. She was in no condition to go on search and rescue right now. Gobber had been up all night, she could tell, the black bags under his eyes, the tired movements. The spitting wind and the suddenly incessant rush of ash in the air didn't help, either, she was afraid. Her own eyes were beginning to twitch to the stuff in the air. Hiccup could have helped so much with the dragons, if he were well - if he were here. The kids mulled around her, and next to her, Stoick - a fuming volcano about to explode, so hot was his irritation. His heavy form shook in the swirls of air, like a mythical sculpture in the fog, standing over the sea. She smirked, had better things to do than imagine fairytales and legends. "Hookfang's not ready, either, is she?" she asked Gobber.

"Of course not," Snotlout cut in suddenly, "thanks to Hiccup and his Dad."

Astrid snapped her head to him. "Hey, watch your mouth - what's that supposed to mean?"

Snotlout put his lips together, stared at her.

"Snotlout, you shut up." Stoick's big voice was barely controlled, and Astrid could see a thousand thoughts running in the back of his mind. "You get your parties ready, I'm getting on Thornado. Sven and Gandalf, Halldorr, Fishlegs, Snotlout, you get in the air, now. Tuffnut and Ruffnut you make sure your dragons are ready. I expect to see you up in five minutes, and you don't come back until you get my son. Understood?"

"Got it, chief," Tuffnut said, voice edged with excitement. He punched his fists together.

"You double up on your dragons, okay, kids?" Stoick latched eyes with Astrid. "We need to spare every dragon we can to get ready here, in case we have to move before we find him."

Astrid nodded, turned to the twins. "Let's hit it." Ruff nudged her head down, caught up with her brother, who was already making his way to the Zippleback. "Belch, Barf, let's make this snappy," he hummed and mounted his head. Ruff swung her legs over her side, and Astrid hopped onto the back, the base where the two necks converged. She suddenly felt someone behind her latch some arms around her waist. She whirled. "Snotlout!"

"He said double up!" He grinned.

Making jokes . . . "Have you no respect?"

"For what?"

"Wipe that grin off your face, I'm here for Hiccup, and nothing else."

"Sure, sweet." He hugged her tight, as the dragon suddenly launched and they sped into the stormy sky. "There's not a moment to lose!" Fishlegs' voice came broken in the vast wind. As if they didn't already believe that. She caught sight of him fluttering awkwardly on his dragon next to them, the round shapes sorely non-aerodynamic. She grasped the spyglass close to her, squinted in the rain that was now falling, as they rose higher and the wind flapped stronger against her face. They rose, up into the lowering overcast, leveling out below the base of the clouds. The ocean was so big - and Hiccup was so small. But he couldn't have gotten out that far.

They headed opposite the sunrise, where Stoick had told them Herkja was located. They'd have to cross paths with Dragon Island. Her eyes squinted just thinking about it. Too much ash, from the thing blowing off steam again sometime in the night. She hated it, knew that a driving curtain of rain was bad enough - but a wall of ash? Hiccup was gonna be one sticky, grimy mess when they got to him. If they found him. She shook her head at the thought, suddenly realized- "You think he went by ship, or by dragon?" she said out loud, to no one really.

"Hiccup?" Snotlout behind her suddenly laughed out loud. "He'd scam out on his hands and knees to-"

"Hiccup did not scam." Astrid jabbed her elbow suddenly into Snotlout's side, relished his pained, pitiful moan. "Hiccup never scrams."

"Oh, okay," Snotlout whimpered. Astrid looked on ahead, smiling, through the rain and ash.

"Well he was stupid, you gotta admit," Ruffnut drawled from her post on Barf's head, shielded her face with her arm.

"Stupid - and far too noble for his own good," Astrid shouted back, leaning forward, letting Snotlout hold her closer to keep her from falling. "But let's be serious. Wouldn't any of you feel the same way if it was one of your dragons nabbed right now?" She swiveled around, eyed each of them. Fishlegs stroked Meatlug thoughtfully, and the twins threw knowing glances at each other. She turned away from them, set her eyes across the ash-drenched sea and sputtering whitewater, let the gritty, brisk wind lift her bangs above her eyes.

She could hear a slapping ahead of her between the two Zippleback heads. Tuffnut punching at his sister again. "Yeah, Ruff, what's more stupidly noble than nabbing your dragon back from three hundred Drakkars and a thousand angry warriors? That's totally awesome, man, it's totally hero."

Ruffnut slapped his arm. "And don't forget he's got only one good arm. I'm not missing this."

"Won't you two get serious?" Astrid half-rose from her seat on the dragon. "We're gonna stop him from being a hero. For his own good."

Tuffnut's shoulders slumped. "You sound like his mom, if he had one." He giggled.

"Hey, you don't know anything about his mother," she spat savagely, slapped the side of the Zippleback with her fist. The dragon quivered under her fingers. The kids didn't know about the whole story he'd told her, but that kind of insult, it was too much, even in jest. "Who's side are you guys on anyway?" she hissed. "You know he's not up to this kind of thing, not in his condition. I'd gladly run into battle with him if he wasn't stabbed, half-drowned, and dying of pneumonia. Maybe I'm stupid." She palmed her face in her hand, hit the spyglass against her forehead. "Maybe I should have gone after Toothless myself, gave him his precious peace of mind, ugh!" But Toothless was too important to him, so . . .

"Uh guys?" Fishleg's quavering voice. She craned her neck to the left, saw him holding a stubby hand over his helmet and trying to steady Meatlug in the rising gale. "Is it just me, or did we just lose the rest of the search party?"

"What?" Astrid scanned the air around them suddenly, her vision met only by thickening waves of blurry gray rain and ragged, lowering clouds. She shivered suddenly, her arms and face coated in water and her bangs, stringy and sticking and awful over her eyes. She swiped her hair away and grabbed Snotlout's knees as she twisted her body on her perch and made a full circle of a search around the dragon, over the quickly vanishing expanse of the roiling waves. No Stoick, no Sven, nobody. Only a curtain of gray in every direction.

"They're lost!" Snotlout blurted as she curved around him to look behind the Zippleback. She pursed her lips. Or we are. She lifted the spyglass to eye level, scanned the murky horizon. Even Fishlegs and Meatlug were fading vaguely in the thick curtains of rain as the plump boy and dragon tried desperately to keep with the Zippleback.

"Can't you go any faster?" Astrid shouted suddenly, the rain melting into her mouth.

"Hey, Belch is huffing the best he can," Tuffnut slung his offended blond dreadlocks behind him, his sister shoving her braids and also snapping back. "We won't take you for a ride next time if you're gonna be such a cranky passenger." The twins jolted forward again, facing the driving rain. Astrid jutted her chin at them and sighed at the rhythm of the dragon's flight. She continued staring through the spyglass. But what a waste it was, like staring into a mug of yaknog for all the good it was doing her. The morning was slipping by fast, the storm was strengthening, the gritty ash was unbearable. And Hiccup was nowhere in sight. They could have passed him for all she knew, judging by the opaqueness of the rolling fog enveloping what little remained of visible water. If only they had set out for him sooner, and if only she could fly faster, faster! If only she had Stormfly right now, instead of languishing on this lethargic reptile. Hiccup, why did you have to go off and be a hero?

It was too many hours now; she had lost count of the endless search over the sea. What was she doing in this blinding rain, getting chilled to death and probably getting lost in the middle of the sea? Dragons couldn't fly forever. What if they themselves couldn't find land? What if they went out too far and didn't head home? This

weather would down them, this storm and this ocean could land them in the unforgiving waves. And they wouldn't be much better off than Hiccup then, would they?

Her skin crawled at the very thought of leaving him out here, cold and wet, hurting and alone. She wouldn't turn back, couldn't leave him out here to wait for the storm to blow over. He was so worried about Toothless, it was true, with that dumb sort of love that was bound to get him killed one of these days. But maybe she had that for him, too, for the stupid son of a chief. Right now she didn't care, it wasn't the place to think big thoughts about this mess. She was going out to save him and that was the end of the matter, suicidal missions on both sides notwithstanding.

A faint glow pulsated suddenly in the corner of her eye, through the thick curtain of cloud to their right. She opened her mouth, almost spoke, but Tuffnut and Ruffnut suddenly angled the Zippleback to the lights, Fishlegs and Meatlug shifting course automatically, hypnotically, like moths drawn to a candle in a sea of darkness. But there were many candles, all across the water, pinpoints of lights dotting the waves below them. The lights, alive, leaping, gliding, out of the water. Water dragons aglow, thin wings shining, their heaving sides lined with lights that flickered as the bodies crisscrossed in and out of the sea. Myriads of lighted dragons jewelizing the sea, playing in the pitching waves, playing delightfully in the storm.

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The fact is, they didn't call him a Dragon Whisperer for nothing. He perked the moment he felt it, felt that presence of something big and dangerous in the water, bigger and different than the school of water dragons that was purring and glowing around him. His body stiffened and he swallowed. He peeked his head out of the blanket that he'd thrown over himself as a sort of hood. Another blanket was hanging in a tent shape from the mast and bow, providing a sort of shelter from the rain and wind that he expected from the storm - and that had been pummeling him and his ship for the last twelve hours. The little fire he made was sitting in front of him, flickering away under the protection of the tent, burning in the depression of metal he had built into the floor of the ship. He'd made The Night Fury flexible for things like this, like living long-term on a ship. After all, she was a prototype, a fully functioning warship, swiveled crossbows on the rims and a small lookout tower at the top of one of its three masts. The crossbows were, of course, his Dad's idea. He was still iffy about his supposed fate as a Viking warrior, what with war and bloodshed . . . it wasn't looking very attractive now, not unless it was really needed, and that, he felt, didn't happen too often. Not under his watch, it wouldn't.

But chiefdom, like Induction Day, was pretty far away now. Thoughts like that had run their course around his head in that half day on the sea, over the endless, faceless ocean. Now more pertinent issues were at stake. Like Toothless. And the monster sea dragon he felt somewhere in the ocean around him. He didn't have time to get shipwrecked, and he spat a nonsense syllable of irritation before flapping open the tent cover, squinting in the torrents of rain and flecks of dust, ash, and now snow that was swirling around him. He caught himself and grabbed the mast, a little dizzy suddenly. He'd already gone the whole run of illness in the first couple hours on

deck - from the chills to the nausea, the fever and coughing, the general seasickness. He missed Astrid. But the bouts kept him busy for a while, some other pain from the one in his shoulder, although battling all that while still manning the tiller alone was a challenge, especially as the winds shifted and he had to adjust things. But _The Night Fury_ was a good girl, and she took the winds beautifully, like he planned her to, the huge sails - all seven of them, plus the subordinate sails he linked from mast to bow on the front - all billowed wide and glorious in the wind, like Night Fury wings stalling a dive. That's where he'd got the idea from, Toothless. . . .

Now, with the storm still in full swing and the weather being a general adversity, he stepped out of his shelter, expecting to find something dangerous in the waves. But maybe it was just a feeling inside him. There didn't seem to be anything out there, not yet anyway. Just lots of harsh, rolling water, waves breaking out into white, thunder somewhere in the distance, under the black clouds. And of course, the glow he was now used to - the shimmering lights of the water dragons as they lapped around his ship and played in the stormy waves around him. He pursed his lips.

". . . _hey_ . . ."

He swore he heard that, something, some _voice_. _He whirled to face upward suddenly, shielded his eyes from the rain and falling drifts of ash and snow. "Meatlug. . .?" he mumbled. Sure enough, it was the Gronckle, spinning shakily in the stormy air, the round shape of Fishlegs balancing atop him. And behind him, the twin's Zippleback, the heads bobbing in a fashion unmistakable. The poor dragons were dead tired, and-

He suddenly realized. This was a search party - for _him_, and those poor dragons were probably flying for hours. When did they start? And was his Dad here . . . ?

He jumped down suddenly, into his little tent near the mast, felt like he needed to scramble for something, anything, because he had this feeling they were going to want to take him back. And that couldn't happen. Suddenly the ship lurched to the right and Hiccup jolted, grabbed the mast for support. His injury complained again at the quick movement and he mentally berated it. The ship jolted to portside all of a sudden, and he felt weight being put on her, growls and finally human voices. They'd landed. He released the mast, crawled out towards the opening of the tent. The kids were jumping down off the dragons, which were panting on the deck of the ship. Astrid hopped off the neck of the Zippleback, Snotlout sliding off from behind her. He stared Hiccup down suddenly, hot complaint in his voice. "We've been flying for hours!"

Hiccup raised a brow. What happened to the sympathy?

"Hey!" Tuffnut jumped off his head of the dragon, snapped at Snotlout. "You should have enjoyed it, I thought you liked Astrid . . ."

Astrid stomped on ahead of them, down the wooden planks, landing on the panel of iron next to the tent structure, bending down to him, a sudden concern in her eyes. "Are you all right-?"

"Sure, Astrid." He popped out of the opening, tried to get to his feet, and suddenly felt her arms around him, supporting him. "What were you thinking, are you out of your mind?" She latched one hand on his chest, the other on his back. He tried to wave her off, tried to step out of her grasp. "Hey, I'm okay, didn't you get my note?"

"That's what convinced me you'd gone nuts."

"Ugh-" he snapped a sigh.

"You're coming back with us."

"I can't, Astrid."

"Can you please stop being stupid."

"We've gone through all this before-"

"Hey, Hiccup and- and Astrid. . ." Fishlegs' little voice piped in suddenly, shaky. Hiccup looked up, but Astrid was still looking at him, at his shoulder and holding him up.

"I, uh, think we'd better get moving . . ." Fishlegs was pointing out at the ocean, and the kids behind him - the twins and Snotlout - followed his gaze. Hiccup sucked in a breath, knew what it was before Fishlegs even had to point it out. Out in the middle of the ocean, lightened by the glow of the hundreds of dragons in the sea, he saw the huge gigantic dragon he'd felt all along. Astrid stiffened suddenly next to him, yelped as she saw the huge dragon. "What the-"

"It's the Great Dragon," Hiccup said quickly, "he's not dange-"

An ear-splitting roar shot at them suddenly. The ship jolted, sending them backwards suddenly, Hiccup slipped and hit the deck, gasped as his left arm smacked under him. "Whoa!" Fishlegs shrieked. The twins yelped, odd smiles on their faces as they hit port side, grappling the metal rim and scrambling up to where he and Astrid were. Snotlout had somehow slipped overboard and was squeaking as he fumbled for the rim. Astrid reached out for him. "Grab it," she snapped, and hauled him over as the ship lolled starboard, Hiccup sliding across the metal panels on deck. The drifting rain above mingled with a cold, salty splash of seawater on his face. Dragon screams came at them suddenly, and flashes of dragon wings as Hiccup realized Belch, Barf, and Meatlug weren't on deck anymore, were flapping up into the sky, the ship unstable to hold them. "Hey!" Fishlegs shouted, clamoring the air to get to his dragon, who was flapping shakily above them. The screams were coming from afar now, with those dragons out in the sea. Big, heavy screams, from that huge dragon - and, and another dragon. Hiccup scrambled up, threw a hand over the rim and looked out. Astrid was screeching something behind him, probably telling him to get back or something, he didn't quite catch it because-

That Skrill again, now fighting the Great Dragon. The Skrill was covered in flashes of white and blue, sparks of purple. Increasing, brighter, louder, it seemed, and the big dragon, that monster of a creature. He opened his mouth suddenly, shot out fiery daggers from his jaws, let out an ear-splitting boom that dug harsh and deep into Hiccup's skull. "Aaaargh," he hissed, claspings his right arm over

around his head. The water dragons all around were splashing up everywhere, yelping suddenly, in sounds he could only place as fear and maybe even pain. The roar died down and he peeked up slightly, heard someone gasp behind him - it sounded like Fishlegs.

"No!" came a scream. _Snotlout?_ He whirled, his right arm latching onto the rim of the boat as the ship careened back again. A water dragon suddenly flapped onto the deck, splashing its tail into Hiccup's face. Snotlout's panicked yelping continued through the sound of water in his ears. He gasped as the sea water soaked up his upper body, finding its way under the bandage on his shoulder. Astrid was crawling up to him suddenly, and lurched into him as the ship leveled out and another boom came screaming from the direction of the fighting dragons afar. "Hiccup!" she yelled, grabbing him and shouting as some other force suddenly wavered the ship level again, unsteadily shaking on the surface of the ocean. The colorful lights of dragons everywhere flashed in his vision, and then the boom again - and a shot of something sharp and white. He could see purple-white light flash across the sky, lightning without thunder, and he immediately knew it was the Skrill. He grabbed the ship's edge, hauled himself up to see over, saw the lightning dragon flapping away from the Great Dragon, the great beast heaving its mass over the waves, roaring again, yelps from the water dragons surrounding the ship, surrounding the huge creature.

"_Where's our dragons?_" someone shouted. Ruffnut. He whirled, Astrid in his face, still trying to protect him somehow, from what, he didn't know. Water and random dragons were everywhere. "What's happening?" he shrieked, and another wave of water rolled the ship.

"Stay down!" Astrid shouted, covering him.

"From _what?_" he shot, trying to get out from under her.

"_Meatlug!_" Fishlegs was screaming now. Hiccup pushed Astrid off of him, slid across the deck, looked, followed Fishlegs' gaze, up, towards the black sky and rain and wind. The spotty shapes in the distance, flapping, screaming, he could hear it from here, those awful fearful cries. Belch, Barf, and Meatlug were flying desperately away, and- another ear-splitting roar from the Great Dragon. Hiccup hissed through clenched teeth, buckled down, heaved a breath, felt his shoulder scream and the chills in his body consume his nerves. Something warm and soft draped over him, cradled as he covered his ears, sprawled on the unsteady deck. Astrid bent her body over his, her elbows jutting into his side as she clapped her palms over her ears.

". . . our dragons . . ."

The words went around faintly, through his own covered ears, but he knew what was happening. The Great Dragon's horrifying roar . . . what dragon wouldn't fly from that, not any in his right mind. .

.

Then a scream.

Ruffnut.

He struggled to get out from under Astrid, uncapped his ears. "What's happening-?" he shrieked. Astrid rose, gasped. A wash of white fear sparked through him, and he had to get free. Astrid was limp suddenly, and he jolted up, looked over the ship's edge, saw white, white. Lightning, sparks of purple, the Skrill's fire, everywhere, running across the water, tripping over the waves.

Lightning.

Metal.

Someone's arms latched around him suddenly, pulled him into the center of the ship, away from the metal rims and the panels of iron that formed the fire pit under the tent. He gasped, his body twisting and his shoulder complaining again. "Get away from the sides!" Astrid screamed and he felt the kids cover him, gathering in the center. The ship rocked again, a crackle of lightning, the great boom. Astrid pushed her face down into him, eyes shut and pained. The sound throbbed into his brain and he opened his mouth desperately, let out a yell. The sound ended, suddenly, roughly, and he gasped. There was a strange, sudden silence, the lap of water against the hull. Astrid exhaled suddenly, leaned up, and looked out. He could hear splashes, desperate fast splashes. The water dragons around- "What's happening?"

Snap.

He jolted, the spark of that lightning fire, he could feel the guttural hum of the Great Dragon. Someone gasped above him, and he saw their eyes locked on something on the sea. He thrust his right arm into the deck, elbowed himself upward, looked, blinked suddenly at the throbbing glow of the huge creature, his great form lifting out of the water, white foam around him, waves that he knew were bound to overturn them, gasped, dug his nails into the wood below him. The scream of the Skrill, as he flew deftly away from the monster's gaping mouth, that great roar again, the ear-splitting horror. Astrid hit the deck, tried to bring him with her. "No." He pulled himself forward, needed to see this, knew something was happening, watched as the Skrill shivered in the air near the clouds, suddenly dive down and blast, blast a tendril of white lightning into the jaws of the Great Dragon. Hiccup gasped, memories crashing back. Toothless and the final battle . . . The Skrill threw his head up, let out a cackle, thrust his snout towards the sea and sent his lightning over the waves. Hiccup lashed back, blinked madly, the blinding white. Dragon screams crashed into his head, the water dragons. That pained, helpless desperation, as the white lightning rushed over the sea, pushed up and sparked over the ship. Hiccup lunged down on deck, hid his face from the blindness. The hissing cackle of the Skrill was so close suddenly, he could feel the wingbeats, the splash of dragons as they flailed in the waves. The shock, the lightning shock, was getting to them, in the water, defenseless against the fire. A deep groan waved over him suddenly, a reverberation he could feel so tangible and horrifying. The Great Dragon's roar again, coming closer, near. He could sense it, and it scared him suddenly. "Astrid-!" he called, looked up, saw water coming at them, the ship lurching backward at the wave, a great uneven wave, rushing at him, the waters full of wailing, panting water dragons, their eyes, he could see as they spilled over the deck, jittered with the shock of the lightning fire, their bodies

vibrating. Scales rubbed by him as his body slapped against the starboard side, dragons flapping over, around him. Someone's boot slapped against his head, his vision blurred a moment, the great roar consumed his head, filled and thundered through his ears and down his body. He inhaled sharply, couldn't think anymore, grabbed the edge of the ship before he caught a glimpse of the white lightning again, washing over him, jolting him, making him cringe suddenly. The ship lurched back suddenly and he slid over the deck, looked up and saw the Skrill flapping up, into the dark skies above, white lightning in his wake. Water poured over Hiccup, and he gasped for breath, felt someone grabbing him, the voices of the kids somewhere on the ship, voices broken and confused, Snotlout gasping, "What happened?"

16. Chapter 14: No Turning Back

a/n: Hope you enjoy this next chapter, folks! As always, thank you for being such awesome readers. I particularly love the illustration that went with this one. Be sure to check it out!

View the illustration at the official webpage. Put a period where the dashes are: [howtotrainyourdragon2 - thecomicseries - com](http://howtotrainyourdragon2-thecomicseries-com)
>or at my deviantArt gallery: [inhonoredglory - deviantart - gallery - 38855965](http://inhonoredglory-deviantart-gallery-38855965)<p>

* * *

><p>How to Train Your Dragon II
>The Dragon Whisperer

**Act II
>A World Shattered
**

**Chapter 14
>No Turning Back
**

Stoick huffed, swung up himself on Thornado. The storm was kicking up, strong and vicious now, and the ash from that volcano was thick and unruly in the air. As chief he could do most about anything, but the weather was one thing that was beyond even him. He squinted in the torrents of water, his bushy eyebrows wet and being a general menace to his eyesight. He cursed, pushed his helmet higher up his head. He'd lost sight of his party hours ago, which normally wouldn't make him worried, especially if that party included the kids. Their presence in the air next to him, with all the bickering and yelps of fear as the storm roared at them - it was distracting, and this was not a time that Stoick the Vast wanted to be distracted.

His son had run off, in a fit of spite and rash stupidity, and he was here, trying to chase him down, when he needed to be back at Berk, commanding his armies and getting those dragons in order and chasing down his scum of a brother and now look at him. His brows creased down over his eyes. What to do with this kid? He looked up.

_Valhallarama . . . _

It was supposed to be his Induction Day, the day that never was supposed to _not_ happen, the day that proves once and for all how much of a man his twig of a son had become. And now this . . . his

son was a kid, still a cursed child. Cursed_. That was the wrong choice of words, wasn't it? Rune . . . his brother had put a curse on his little boy those many years ago when he figured out he was somehow the cause for her dying.

And now?

_A slave takes revenge at once, _

A fool never takes revenge.

But a wise man waits.

It was an old Viking saying, and his brother was living it up like the charmer he once was, those years when everything was innocent, including himself. Now Rune was relishing in his so-called victory, in the pleasure of seeing him demolished. But he wasn't going to let him get away with it, not now, not if he had to battle him in Valhalla itself.

But what did he think it would accomplish? What kind of fools did he take the Hooligans for? Stoick sighed, got his composure. His brother was a Hooligan, and besides. . . all this ranting was going nowhere. He pulled his dragon up, sailed over the sea. He tried to squint in the fog and rain. The damn weather. Just had to be like this now, what did it think? Conspiring to murder his son out in that rough ocean? Hot feelings of anger roiled in him again, and he hated to count the ways his son had made a wrong decision, poor health being the least of them. Yeah, maybe he was playing a hero, but didn't he want a hero for a son?

Not that kind, not for some dragon. _I'm sorry, but Toothless . . . _ Is he really worth that much? His only son was stabbed, sick beyond words . . . sick, like Valla, he suddenly imagined. Could he take another death in his small family? And then the fact that . . . the _other_ reason Hiccup probably left him now. Maybe it hadn't been wise to tell him at this time, the old story of leaving him on the hillside. Hiccup had taken it the wrong way.

Are there that many ways to take it?

Valla, I can handle this, I think.

Really?

Stoick cast his eye over the sea, the scuffed gray waves and the whitewater. Deep thoughts were not his mug of mead, and he was getting angry now, for no reason, just . . . he just wanted to find his son and get this war started. Thornado was swirling suddenly around, some sort of gust of wind, and Stoick cursed, pulled up on the reins of his dragon. "Get- just _up_, Thornado." The dragon hissed, whirled his wings. Stoick looked out, realized the storm was the worst it was ever now. Thoughts of his son shipwrecked on his little ship filled his brain - that, or pelted by rain on some dragon, whichever one he picked as his choice of transport to Valhalla. Either way it wasn't good and those old thoughts of two years ago came crashing back - the quiet, still face that only breathed and slowly breathed for two straight weeks, no other sign of life, not even when they had knifed the stump of leg, cleaning up the injury, doing things to that little body that he seriously only

thought that his warriors and veterans would experience. He was a strong kid. But not strong enough, not enough to realize what was brave and what was suicide.

But isn't that what Vikings were made of?

He mulled, let the wind plaster cold sharp water on his face.

Despite what he'd been telling the boy, he still could not see him as a man, not like this. Not with that ridiculous frame of his, physically, mentally, he was nothing like, like a _man_. And this mission was no excuse for rash heroics, anyway. If he wanted to be heroic, then stay back and help the war effort. Be responsible for his tribe, he was going to run it one day. The thought gave him a lump in his throat. Hiccup, running a tribe.

It'd never happen.

Thornado suddenly yelped, and Stoick realized with renewed alarm the fierce nature of the storm. Lightning jabbed suddenly to his right, flashing cold and white in his face - too close. Thornado banked left, putting Stoick off balance, his face covered from the sheet of rain that got heavier suddenly. Another roll of thunder rolled over him, shocked the waves below, white water and black waves. Stoick hissed a curse, had no time for shenanigans from the weather. Thornado hissed, swept lower down in the water. More thunder, a crack suddenly, flashing daylight on him. He pulled the reins, realized the Thunderdrum was losing some level of control in the madness. He trusted him, though, he was a mighty soldier of a dragon, and no mere storm was going to faze him. "Come on, warrior," he boomed, and the dragon flapped higher into the sky, let out a whitewashed roar of something hot and sharp. Something played in the back of his mind - the possibility that he'd never find his son in this vicious storm. . . .

I'll find him.

But he did have a war to run, and quickly, too. He had dragons to mend, people to organize, horrible visions of madness and murder to avenge. And his son had to go off now and stall him.

If he wanted to be heroic, then stay back and help the war effort. Be responsible for his tribe . . .

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_You're weak, you're sick, and you're _dying_. _

Ormarr hummed hotly, blinked open his eyes, shot a glance at the horribly smug Skrill. He let out a deep, throated yell, spat a whimpered aim of flaming arrows. Skari just had to come back, intercept him on his way to save that rogue Dagr. His fellow water dragons had told him about the Skrill's encountering Toothless, about the whole capture thing, and Skari's evil words. He was mad at him, almost delighted to meet him and put an end to him, like what should have happened eons ago. But Skari was bold this time, bold and smart, he was afraid to admit. He hissed a dragon's curse at the flying dragon. _Shame on you for stooping so low._

Low? Skari lashed back, flying up into the sky. _I'm the one flying, don't you talk to me about 'low'_.

Ormarr hissed.

Look at you. Skari swung himself down near him, eyes flickering with satisfaction. _Who knew dear Dagr's old story could be useful for something_.

Ormarr flapped his mighty tail in the rocking waves, knew that Skari was talking about the monster and how Dagr brought him down. A shot in the mouth, the weak spot, deadly, fatal. Skari, the wicked thing, had tried his lightning fire on him, he could feel it working something horrid in his body, and down the walls of his throat. He shook his head, let out a roar, faced the black water and screamed. Skari would not get one over him, if it's the last thing he'd do. _Never_. He spat a curse at the flapping black shape in the sky, turned his eyes on the scampering water dragons around him, their painful cries yelping and ringing sharp and awful in his ears.

_So Skari grew a spine and tried to kill us, _ he thought.

_Well, you never will, _he shot back at the laughing lightning dragon.

Mend your babies, Orrmar. I don't think you'll be chasing after Dagr anytime too soon. Skari laughed, hissed, shot out a scream of evil delight, sparked his body with lightning again and shot the water one more time. It was a good thing his real young were still at Herkja, but his fellow dragons . . . those poor things. Ormarr turned, his fellow creatures wailing and trying to outrun the white fire. He hummed, threw his great, heaving body on the waves, into the path of the sparkling fire.

We're dying! someone screamed, a scared, awful scream not worthy of a dragon.

You're - not, Ormarr hissed back, the tickle of death playing up his own throat and running down his sides as the fire crawled over him. He still had to save Dagr, that rogue dragon he was, getting himself captured. What was that going to look like to the other water dragons? Didn't he know the rift between their kind? Ormarr eyed down, the little creatures splashing away, some flailing already in the sparks of white, some no doubt dead now. That Skari . . .

The lightning dragon flapped away suddenly, his laugh cackling in the air, and Ormarr lumbered down, let out a mental gasp of pain. Dragons were not invulnerable, and Skari had found the weak spot in him - mentally and physically. He fought the hard inner feelings of weakness, dived into the comforting darkness of the sea. In the fight he hadn't noticed much the little human's ship that wavered on top of the waves, and the little voices, he heard now, shouting, arguing, as he descended, lumbered low and heavy, into the black.

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The chills. Hiccup couldn't tell if it was his injury, or the lightning fire. _Maybe both._ Though the sky and the ship were now deathly quiet, his sight was still livid with the vision of white-purple streaks of the Skrill's lightning fire that had darted

and crackled along the metal rim of the ship all around only a few minutes before. It had jumped on anything metal or wet, landed and sparked on it. It clawed along the metal siding on the floor near him. The fire was frigid, horribly cold, a strange, stinging, numbing cold he never felt before. The Book of Dragons said nothing about the Skrill's fire being like _that_ . . .

His hair and the fibers of his wet coat still stuck up and fizzed with the crackling cold energy of the lightning fire. The strange cold fizz haloed around him and he batted his right arm at it, could barely stand another minute lying on the deck bathed in that sparking stuff. His hand moved up to flatten his crackling hair, but . . . _my fingers._ They were suddenly stiff, cold, almost paralyzed. He flung a glance at the kids, saw most of them already on their feet, their fur coats and hair sticking up and their bodies snapping with sparks whenever they bumped into each other. Spitelout's black spiky hair wouldn't stay down, and it would have been funny if he wanted to laugh. He got his hand under him, tried to shift his weight to get up. They could have died there, had the fire not passed over them and left them unscathed. Thank goodness the rain had subsided. Wet and chilled with lightning fire would not mix well in him.

He felt Astrid suddenly put her arms around him, hauling him up to his feet. He winced, grabbed the edge of the ship, his feet slipping on the watery wash over the deck. The metal was cold, wet, on his palms and he jabbed his hand away.

"Hiccup, you okay?" she gasped, her one arm tight around his chest, squeezing his left shoulder into her. Hiccup flinched, felt the wound hiss at his nerves. "Uh, could you let up a little, that's my bad shoulder you're-" He clenched his teeth.

She released him quickly. "Oh, sorry."

He exhaled, closed his eyes tight as the fresh complaint throbbed down his arm and side. She took his hand instead, and he felt her fingers wrap around his. He heard the kids' voices suddenly, arguing already, shouting now.

". . . for our dragon to just run off like that, come _on_." It was Tuffnut.

"Hey if that was Hookfang, it'd never happen."

"It's not about you, Snotlout."

"Hey," Ruffnut's voice rose higher. "Belch and Barf are good dragons."

"And Meatlug didn't intent to, I'm sure," Fishlegs was squeaking. "She was just scared. We were all scared."

"Yeah, who was scared?" Snotlout got that arrogance in his voice now.

"Face it," Tuff snapped, "that thing scared the snot out of you."

"Did not."

"To."

"_Not_."

"You know what? I'm finished arguing with you."

Hiccup squinted open his eyes, saw the kids there over by the second mast, a tight circle of hot words and angry faces. Snotlout was having a face-off with Tuffnut, Ruff was fisting her hands, lips pursed, her braids a wet and crumpled mess. Fishlegs wandered over to the edge of the ship, looked down at the water, still roiling and uneven, scattered with dead and dying water dragons. He cupped his hands, faced up into the dark and raining clouds. "_Meatlug! _Come back here."

Tuffnut lashed his arms out irritably. "What _was_ that gigantic monster of a Grendel's mother doing over _here_? And what's with that Skrill?"

Hiccup swallowed. The Great Dragon had done it again - scared their dragons silly. Like he did way back when he was flying Toothless over the mines. And then meeting the Skrill again . . . it was just all so unexpected and sudden. Where did they come from? It seemed the Skrill just flung himself down from the storms, approached that mighty beast and just started having one out with him. He could feel definitively that those two knew each other and that there was something so much more than mere animal hot-headedness at stake. Why else would that lightning dragon hold his own for so long, before leaving? There was internal motivation at work, but what . . . ? And just how much did dragons know? How much could they hold grudges, like humans could?

Hiccup glanced suddenly across the waves, tried to spy that vast island of a body somewhere in the raining mess of whitewater, but the waters were void and empty. The giant beast had just . . . vanished. As quickly as he came out. Like a storm, fast to come and fast to go. Maybe the Skrill had deterred him - but how could he? So large a creature as that . . .

He felt somewhere inside of him, the fading presence of that beast, and he swallowed, wondered if the dragon was somewhere underneath them, somewhere in the dark within of the great ocean. His ignorance of the dragon's motivations ate at him.

He shook his head, tried to take a step forward. Astrid held him gently and guided him forward. She spoke suddenly, lashed a sharp word to the kids, who were still arguing about things that could never change. "You guys just stop it, okay?" she hissed and Hiccup felt a contained irritation in her voice, the vibration of withheld emotion in her body. He shivered suddenly. "Look at the situation we're in," she continued. "Fishlegs is right, we've got big problems on our hands."

Ruffnut pushed her brother aside, strode up to Astrid. "I think that's pretty obvious. With our dragons flying out on us - and what happened anyway? We almost all got killed. I'd like a little explanation when that sort of thing gets thrown at me."

Another voice cut in suddenly. "And why are they all dead?"

Hiccup looked up, saw Fishlegs looking down over the edge of the ship, his arms on the rim, the water calmer now, suddenly, the lap of motionless bodies thumping the hull quietly, gently. The bodies of a few water dragons still trembled in the water, some struggling with life, others writhing in death.

"It's the Skrill's lightning, it's - paralyzed them," Hiccup said, stepping forward and getting out of Astrid's grasp. He stumbled over to the edge to the left of Fishlegs, heard Ruffnut follow him. She over with him, looking down, over, across the white-tipped sea, the glinting auroras of those creatures muddled and faint now, throbbing with the last figments of life, a few dragons sinking down into the blackness, shapes long and finned and scaly, now dull and grim and quiet. Hiccup swallowed, felt chilled again and huddled his right arm around his body. "That fire shocks them, and they were so close to it. It's like lightning. It's different than other dragons' fire. We would have died, too, but . . . the ship saved us."

"Stupid Skrill," Snotlout hissed, running a hand over his still fizzled hair and jolting his body against the rim on the other side of Fishlegs.

Hiccup bit his lip, a sharp pain eating at him to see those helpless dragons, too late to save so many, floating and sinking into the rolling water, curls of stray lightning still sparking over their bodies. A lump formed in his throat and he forgot about his shoulder suddenly. "Shhh, dragon, hush," he whispered softly towards the scaly heads in the water, their dull eyes flickering and blinking up at him.

"What are you doing?" Ruffnut's voice came, her braids flapping to his right in the corner of his eye.

"I . . . don't know," Hiccup sighed, crossed his brows, didn't look at her. He stared into the eyes of one water dragon in particular near him, a beautiful white-bodied one with little orbs of glow over her body and along her long and sharp tail as flat as the blade of a sword. Her wings folded in over her breathing sides as she floated in the water, trembling yet barely moving, and her slitted eyes staring back at him, scared he was so close, yet she couldn't get away. "Shhhh, girl, it's okay," he whispered, a light lilt in his voice, that lyricism he heard spoken between water dragons. She hummed back suddenly, her deep pupils growing large and black and her body slowly, delicately relaxing. He hummed to her, tried to comfort her in her final moments, as her body grew limp and wavered there under the waves, sinking, drifting lower, and finally vanishing into the black.

He couldn't look into the ocean anymore and glanced up at Ruffnut next to him, her wet face glistening and strands of hair plastered on her cheeks, her braid tangled and disheveled and sticky with something from the sea.

Ruff wiped her nose, looked at him. "So you're done with your funeral?"

He nodded tightly, turned to the others. They were quiet. Snotlout spoke first. "So the big monster's gone now?" he said, his voice lonely in the lap of the sea against the hull, and the still fierce winds. "He isn't going to surprise us again?"

Hiccup sighed, couldn't really answer with a definite yes or no. "Maybe." He cleared his throat. "He's not a monster. Toothless knows him. But I don't know what it is between him and the Skrill." He smirked.

Tuffnut suddenly slapped a hand on his right shoulder. "Dumb dragons, that's all."

Hiccup leaned slightly, slipped out from under Tuff's hand. "It's bigger than that."

"Does it matter?" said a voice behind him.

Hiccup turned around to face her. Astrid, hands on her hips, stared at him, gently, but with a lace of criticism in her words.

"Hiccup, I don't care right now what those dragons are going. That stuff's over with, they're gone, and you're still alive, which is a wonder in itself. We're taking you home before that monster comes back again, and that's the final word on the matter."

Hiccup nodded his head once, not out of agreement, but something involuntary, because he knew she was going to say something like that at some point. She'd been bent on keeping him safe throughout the evening yesterday, and were it not that her motives were good, he was tempted to berate her. Because he knew he couldn't do what she asked of him.

She walked over to the tiller, grabbed it sharply.

"Astrid," Hiccup said, calmly, stepped over to where she stood and put his hand suddenly, roughly on the back of hers. She eyed him, firmed her hand on the handle. He pressed his palm down, over hers, looked at her. She raised her brows suddenly, looked down at his hand, got a flicker of something in her eye, a twitch in her fingers. "So there's no stopping you. . ." she said, tried to push his hand off hers.

He said nothing, kept his hand firm.

"You know your Dad came out, too, to look for you."

"Yeah? Why, because he felt guilty?" He bit his lip suddenly, realized he had no idea where that came from, that foreign bitterness. It was not like him, he never felt this way before. He pursed his lips. All through the trip, he purposefully hadn't thought about what his father had said the night before. It was something foreign to him, and he didn't know quite how he'd react. Sure, it was good practice getting disowned and rejected at one point in your life by your father - but almost killed? That was on a whole different level, and he didn't trust himself with emotions. Not when he had too much time to think and muse about it, and risk something like what just happened - bitterness.

"You're just going to give yourself up," her voice came again, hot and sarcastic. "Gonna have those killers murder you again."

Hiccup bit his lip, glad to think about other things besides his father right now. . . . She was just trying to protect him, trying to

keep him alive. "I thought you were supposed to support your man," he said, trying a touch of a smile on her. She had to come over to his point of view.

She put her hand on his, grasped the wrist of his hand that still pressed on hers over the tiller. "If you go to that island," she said, pointedly, "I swear I won't have a man. Just a very dead irresponsible boy."

The last words stung suddenly, and he got a horrid sense of *deja vu* from them, realized it was his father again - the big speeches at home before bed, the Induction Day pep talks that wouldn't be utilized now. . . responsibility. "Astrid, if you want to call me irresponsible, then do so the day I leave Toothless. He's slated to die out there and if I don't try something, I'd-" He gasped out exasperatedly. "You know me."

"Yeah, I know you," she hummed, not letting go of that hand. "I know you're gonna kill yourself for that dragon, and other people could still help you - and you refuse."

"When did I refuse?"

"Your father-"

"He said it'd be too late, they can't spare anything."

She huffed, took her hand off of his and grabbed the other end of the tiller, shifted it suddenly, began to turn it. He held, latched his left hand onto the bar between her hands, stopped the tiller, kept it firm, despite the growing tremor in his wound. He tried another tactic. "What about the rest of our dragons? Don't you want to find them?"

He felt a presence behind him suddenly, the other kids, listening to them. There was tension in the air, a great pause.

She peered up at him, inspected his eyes, squinted. "Where did they go?" she asked, as if knowing he was playing a trick on her.

He swallowed, eased somewhat in his grip on the tiller. He nudged his head up towards the direction of the setting sun. His eyes moved a moment to the spinning floating contraption he'd dug into the thick top rim of the boat, realized with a smug satisfaction that they were still going on track, despite the dragons' battle, that in fact, the way the water looked now - a different color, a different current - they might actually have progressed significantly on the road to that enemy island.

"They went that way," he hummed, and through the fog and mist, he could detect the growing speck of the island - at long last. Herkja. He could see it over the ship's rim, towards the horizon a clearing in the endless fog as shafts of light shot through the water on ahead. The curtains of faint, drifting rain lifted from the long horizon he had been driving towards, relentlessly, finally, after hours and hours of blinding mist.

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Hervi winced as his back smarted on him and the logs cradled in his

arms tilted and threatened to spill on the walkway. He kept his right fist balled, hurried his steps as swiftly as his stiff legs could pass through the darkening town square thick with the yells of Skirra VÃ©llites and the hiss and roar of leather-bound and metal-chained dragons being dragged towards the ring in the mountain, into makeshift cages suddenly crowding with various dragon species. They'd landed just mere hours before, but the scurry of warriors was fresh and alive, and Heather was eager to get started on the training of new dragons for the war. He smarted at the thought, hated to see advances in the quest of destruction. When he heard the first volleys of that attack on Berk, with the knowledge that Heather had killed a man - no, a boy, a mere child. Barely old enough to wield a sword, hardly the object of retribution.

And then she had to take that tamed, beautiful creature of theirs, to be used as the prize dragon in the hunt. He could almost entertain the thought of Vott's thirst for violence, the uncouth motives of that fellow slave. It sickened him, but hurt him more to see Heather, what she had become, what she was capable of. He could still remember that little girl Heather, bobbing on his knee, asking him when Rune was coming back home from raiding. Those days, before she knew he was a slave and she was his master.

He quickened his pace, wanted to avoid the odd traffic of freshly-captured, flailing, lashing dragons being hauled from the woods into the town. It was more than just the prize dragon now, that beautiful Night Fury, chained and caged. It was now so many others . . . And Heather thought she could train them? In his mind, he looked back, saw the chief's son out there when he'd talked to him that one night the Skirra VÃ©l was at Herkja. _Keep that dragon safe_. The boy had trained the creature marvelously. The Skirra VÃ©l council had tried to learn his skills - before they disposed of him; the thought made his jaw clench - but would they be able to duplicate the wonders carried out in Berk with dragons?

He found the slave house finally, a little grass-roofed structure behind the larger house of Rune's. The door sat wide open and welcoming. _Noor_, he thought. She was thoughtful and kind like that.

He strode on, lay the logs just inside the doorway, moved inside towards a little wooden chair near the front of the doorway.

"_Estat?_"

Hervi slumped on the small wooden chair of the tiny cottage, sighing something mumbled and tired. This was what aging was all about . . . he rubbed his wrist, the joints complaining. He unballled his fist and rolled around a smooth black scale in his palm. "What was that, Noor?" he mumbled, looked up at the nimble French woman standing in front of him, her grimy, stained apron tied loosely around her famished waist.

"_Estat?_" she repeated, and he sighed, shook his head. It was probably something about him coming back from the trip. He _had_, after all, been gone for almost four months, the stop at Berk being the last place. He grimaced, and she suddenly stepped over to him, her deft, dainty feet sharp on the wooden floorboards of the slave house. She prodded again, and he looked up, knew she was asking about

his depressed mood. She would do things like that, force confessions out of people. In the notion it would help them.

Of course she was right, no matter what language the other person spoke, or the fact that she was almost deaf and couldn't hear it anyway. She was perceptive like that, and he felt blessed to have her around to share this fate.

"What- happened?" her broken Norse came through the thick European accent.

"They've killed that boy," he said simply, crossed his brows and fingered his worn brown tunic suddenly, looking down.

"_C'est pas vrai_," she hummed, scuffed back to the chair in the other side of the dark room, next to her sleeping bench that doubled as a table. She sat herself down and hotly peeled potatoes into a wooden bucket.

"Any new slaves?" came a voice behind him. Hervi turned, the effort smarting his back. Vott's dark shadow emerged from the corner of the slave cottage, his movement slow and smooth, his face darkened with the dirt of his farm chores, hands crusted with the irremovable stains of hard labor.

"And where's Thorvald?" Hervi answered instead, knowing those two farm hands were often up to mischief together. Who knows what concerns they had struck up this time, something to irate the masters and make things even harder for him to negotiate treatment.

"I asked a question, _Old Chief_," Vott slurred, the irony thick in his voice. Hervi squinted his eyes, peered up at the other slave. Several from the old days, his cousins and fellow warriors from when he was chief of this island - they called him that out of respect, out of a stubborn loyalty despite the fact that the brand mark by unwritten law meant he could no more be chief. But Vott and Thorvald, they were newcomers to Herkja, carried over from some other island on the Archipelago. They were defiant, to him and to the others who still remembered what innocence was. They were cunning, manipulative . . . selfish. They lived for themselves and no one else.

Hervi turned away from his dark eyes, continued to finger the scale in his hand, looked off at the lone flickering candle sitting on the long sleeping bench on the right wall of the room, lighting Noor's small figure and casting orange on her plain wool dress. "We did get some new ones," he hummed, hated to admit it, but salvation comes slowly, and he would somehow change their fate before he died. Vott grumbled, a mumble of throaty noises Hervi could not make out. Noor peered up, shot something hot at the farmer slave and shook her head, continued peeling. Vott slunk away, found the door and opened it, letting the cool night air in and making Hervi shiver, the draft sudden and awful. "So they conquered that place, then?"

Hervi turned. "Not exactly."

"Then . . ." Vott let his voice trail. "The dragon they locked in the ring?" he questioned thickly.

Hervi shifted back around, leaned in his chair, watched Noor peeling. He glanced down at the little black scale in his hand, tucked it into

the frayed lining of his belt. He'd seen the warriors dragging that Night Fury past the heavy doors, the dragon hissing and rearing valiantly against the pull of the chains. Dragons fascinated him, they gave him a sort of joy, always, the fire in their breath, the life in their eyes, the unbridled power and freedom in their limbs . . . And the Night Fury, that stunning creature, to see him alive and beautiful and then captured. . . . The thought suddenly sent a profound sadness over him. If they ever snuffed the life out of those proud eyes . . .

Hervi snapped out of his thoughts, muttered back to Vott in the doorway. "Heather managed to get the dragon beforehand." He cleared his throat.

"Hunt's coming, I guess." Vott's voice was edged.

"But the war's still going on."

"Oh?"

There was a twinge of pleasure in that phrase, and it confused Hervi. "Why do you say that?" He looked back again, saw him running a finger over his small knife, his one piece of personal property and the only thing that the masters let their slaves own.

"You can have your peaceful way, the rest of us trust in bloodshed." He snapped his finger over the blade, peered at Hervi from under black, oily bangs.

Hervi turned back, realized it was the old revolt attempts coming to the fore again. But he wouldn't take him seriously, not this time. There'd been slave revolts before, but they all came to nothing, and they lost more people than what seemed worthy in Hervi's eyes. It only meant another influx of new faces in their midst, more poor souls, more auctions in the town center. And Vott and Thorvald, despite their appearance, just weren't brave enough.

Noor held her head up again, spat a chiding remark to the doorway and Hervi heard the wooden door clap shut. She shook her head, peeled again. Hervi leaned up, saw her motion to him. "Ta-ta, ta." She snapped her hand at him, to come closer. "New slaves?" she said, thickly, and pushed a basket into his hands. "_Va_."

Hervi looked down at it, pulled back the crumpled, dirty fabric wrapped around the contents. An apple, fresh even, and a few crusts of dry bread, and three mushrooms. "Where did you find this?" Hervi whispered, eyeing her critically. She was the kind of girl who'd swipe Rune's own food closet - and she did, a couple times, without regret.

"Bah, bah!" She shooed him and she snapped out a wordy command, the same one she always used when new slaves were going to populate the slave pen, the holding place where the new ones were kept before the auctions, when she sent him off on the regular task of offering them some extra nourishment, something to welcome them to the new and undoubtedly awful world that still awaited them. Hervi smiled at her, nodded and huffed up to his feet towards the door of the little house, the sound of one of her native tunes humming out from her, her lone voice a touch of hope in this lonely place

17. Chapter 15: The Heart of Herkja

a/n: The final chapter before our version of Heather becomes non-canonical! XD Enjoy! The illustration was made mostly by my sister, by the way. :)

View the illustration at the official webpage. Put a period where the dashes are: [howtotrainyourdragon2 - thecomicseries - com](http://howtotrainyourdragon2-thecomicseries-com)
>or at my deviantArt gallery: [inhonoredglory - deviantart - gallery - 38855965](http://inhonoredglory-deviantart-gallery-38855965)<p>

* * *

><p>How to Train Your Dragon II
>The Dragon Whisperer

**Act II
>A World Shattered
**

**Chapter 15
>The Heart of Herkja
**

The little blue dragon was cold, felt a spark of chill run down his thin wisp of a body. He sniffed, stuck his nose into the cold night air, felt something foreign in the atmosphere. His nerves sparked, and he twitched.

Those foreign beings, those humans.

They were on the island.

He clucked, and his skin suddenly turned a deep red, feelings of something threatening in the wind. His little eyes blinked and he jolted his head towards the sea, the rocky beach and the fading greenery. Little figures, dark and - what was it in their movements? Instinct told him distinctly that it was fear, caution. He touched his snout up, sniffed the air, slunk down the rock he was perched on, slithered through the undergrowth and leaves. Sounds, those foreign sounds, came drifting towards him, the scent of brisk salt water and that distinct human scent. He slunk under the leaf of a fern, the plant's sharp edges brushing his scales delicately. The crumbled dirt under his toes, bits of gravel between his scales. He scampered forward and he reached the edge of the forest, to the line at the edge of the shadow of the canopy above. He nudged the air again, felt his body go warm just slightly, saw the two-legged figures coming onshore, in groups of twos, the lead figure with a hesitancy in its step.

His scales hummed dark blue, rippled with a throb of hues. He backed out quickly, the ferns shaking in his wake, retraced the path up into the heart of the forest, towards the base of the jutting mountain peak inland a ways from the shore, towards the yawning face of the cave that sunk deep and dark into that mountain in the center of the island.

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Hiccup inhaled carefully, tried not to let the sharp pain in his breath show. They had reached the outskirts of the island now, almost

night, after a couple hours from the first sighting. They had to scout the area, do things Hiccup was finally thankful he had training for. He swallowed, caught his breath suddenly. So it was all coming down to this now? What was he hoping to do? He looked back at the kids, couldn't really read the expression on their faces, maybe the moonlight wasn't strong enough. Still he could read a mix of anticipation, irritation, excitement - and maybe even fear._ Scratch the maybe_. He'd brought them into something suicidal, and it hit him suddenly. He came out here full of conviction, but saying you'll do something is only half the battle. Whatever happened, he didn't want them getting involved, not if it meant risking their lives in this enemy country. Whatever happened, he'd have to do it alone, if at all possible.

Reconnaissance was slow, tedious. _If only we had dragons_. Dragons would make it so much easier. But it was the best they could do, and when the sun finally sunk under the horizon, Hiccup gave the word to move in.

"You sure it will work?" Astrid asked him suddenly, prodding him. Hiccup whirled up from leaning forward on the tiller.

"What _are_ you thinking of?" she eyed him critically. Hiccup went back to looking at the island in front of them. "This is serious stuff, Astrid."

"Don't I know it. . . ."

Hiccup pulled the tiller sharply, got wind in the sails again, eased towards the island. "I'm just thinking of what we have to do," he hummed.

"Yeah, _some_ plan you've got."

"Why did that come out so negative?" Hiccup glared at her.

She raised a brow. "Did it?" She sniffed.

Hiccup mulled, said nothing. Astrid turned away and joined the other kids, rustled them to their feet. "I think it's time, people, follow the leader." She swung her hand out towards Hiccup. He could taste the irony in her crisp words.

"You don't have to dig it in," Hiccup snapped.

She strode up to him, the ship suddenly heaving gently to one side as the sails picked up a stray gust, leaned in towards the shore. "I don't want any messing around. We're here to get our dragons, and nothing more. You're not playing any hero."

"What do you think I'm going to try to do?"

"I don't know, something dumb, thinking you might be able to help your Dad from way out here."

"Oh, _him?_" Hiccup bit his lip. The war. He'd thought about that. In fact, when the rush of panic over Toothless ebbed somewhat, he actually thought about doing something about the war while he was here. They'd done terrible things to Berk -_ his people_, he suddenly verbalized in his mind, and Astrid had said his father was still

going after them, that he was sure Rune wasn't done with Berk yet. And since he was here and his father wasn't . . . well, the least he could do was take inventory of the enemy. He looked over at Astrid, her face firm and clouded with thoughts. She never liked taking chances - not the ones that involved risking your life. She was cautious, careful, she did things only when she was sure she'd come out on top, when she'd succeed. And he - he was everything _that_ wasn't. Especially when it came to Toothless. He looked away from her, brought the ship in to the shoreline, the hull digging into the sandbar.

It was night now, and with the last forward motion of the ship, the moon had been hidden and they lay in the dark black shadow of Herkja, the black shapes of trees and boulders thick and melding in front of him. There was a pinnacle of sorts in the interior of the island, a bare mountain peak sticking up through the groves of pines and trees near the shore. The sandbar that spanned out on either side of them ebbed with the lilt of blue highlight, as the waves washed over the gravel and reflected gently off the pricks of glow from the moon. A murky fog fanned out from the island, touching them gently, sponging a damper of moistness on his cheek.

"Timberjacks," Fishlegs hummed and Hiccup turned, saw him pointing to a far edge of the island. Hiccup stepped away from the tiller, walked up to him, followed his hand. It wasn't the dragons, but their wake - the tops of trees sliced cut, sharp and sure, and somewhere in the black shadows, shapes moving, black and mysterious, in the undergrowth. Hiccup held his breath suddenly, listened, heard the throb of a thousand humming creatures there in the forest, the breath of something deep and large, and darting in the black, pinpricks of light, along the forest bottom, under the shadows of the ferns and rocks. . . . tiny dragons, perhaps, scampering to their nests in the undergrowth.

The ship lolled suddenly, settled down into the sand, the water slapping in sharp little waves against her hull. Hiccup took a deep breath. _I'm coming for you, bud_, he hummed, focusing. He swung his legs over the edge of the ship, felt Astrid touch his arm suddenly, his left arm. He looked up at her.

"Spread out right?" she whispered.

"That's right."

"I'm coming with you."

Hiccup crossed his brows. "You're supposed to go with Ruff."

"Ruff can take care of herself just fine alongside Tuff. I'm coming with you." Her voice was quiet, soft almost, but firm. She turned away, snuck into what remained of his little tent in the ship, came out with his knapsack full of bandages and equipment. "I hope you brought the herbs, too."

Hiccup shrugged. "I guess I didn't . . ."

"No matter, we'll find them on the island." She swung her leg over, looked at him as they both straddled the rim of the ship. She eyed his body suddenly and hummed. "So your harness is already on, isn't it . . . you think it's going to be so easy."

Hiccup smirked. "Can't be too prepared." He fingered the special harness that he'd slipped on before leaving the house that day.

"Well, let's go." She swung the bag over her shoulder, jumped down, her boots squishing on the sand.

Hiccup inhaled, leapt off. The kids followed, one by one, onto the black sand of Herkja.

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"You think your father is anywhere near here?"

"With the armada he's got? No way. With these sails, _The Night Fury_ travels at three times the speed of one of our old ships, so I doubt he can catch up."

Astrid hummed, adjusted the knapsack on her arm.

"Let me carry that." Hiccup reached out, the chirping insects suddenly halting as he paused.

"Nope, you're injured enough." She pulled back.

Hiccup smirked. "You don't have to keep pushing it." He turned, started forward. It had been almost an hour now, almost time for them to head back to the meeting point and see if anyone reported back anything of the town or people. He hated to come back empty handed. The island couldn't be that big, and he at least wanted a sighting of the town, if not of Toothless or the ships. He looked up at the forest, the monotone forest void of anything distinctive. He'd given the pointing device to Snotlout and Fishlegs, hoped it would help them. He put a hand on a tree trunk, felt the mossy moistness on one side. He looked up. The tree was tall enough, and there was a beautiful set of lower branches that he could use . . .

He looked back, saw Astrid inspecting the ground, the tracks in the dirt. It was animals, all the time, never human. Hiccup sighed, got his right arm up and hoisted himself to the first branch, winced as his side stretched. He got his knees over the branch, and he knelt on it a minute, breathing. Even at this height, things started to look differently.

He reached up, grabbed the next branch.

"Hiccup!"

He ignored her, hoisted himself up the third branch.

"I guess I should stop arguing with you," she shouted, heavy on the sarcasm.

"A wise decision," he yelled back, getting higher up the tree now, his right arm stressing to the hard work he put on it. He got his footing on a thick, almost flat branch, heaved a sigh. The bark was dark, almost black and shredded, the crawling moss a deep green wavered with hints of yellow. He looked down, saw her staring up at him, hands on her hips, a critical scowl he could read even from up

here, at least twenty-some feet off the ground. He wasn't dizzy, too many hours on Toothless ensured that he would never be afraid of heights. He steadied himself, grabbed the trunk, put out his left hand carefully to a branch leaning across him.

He looked out. The moonglow was bright, almost like daylight on the tops of the trees, and the scene before glinted with blue, white, and depths of black. To his right sprung up that massive mountain, a peak of barren soil and a thin cover of grass. Even in the black night, he could make out the great recess within the mountain, a cave of sorts, faint glints of light ebbing within, a massive congregation of creatures, hidden away in its depths. Out to the left spanned a valley, the trees descending down into it, growing shorter and segments, cropped by the sharp edges of Timberjack wings. In the space between the trees, he could see a flock of something, a herd of living things. He squinted, made out antlers in the dark, four-legged shapes. Something swooshed by his vision and he looked up, saw a bat wing its way past him to the right, followed by a tiny, flitting dragon, its body ebbing with a demure glow as he settled down on the branch above him, on a tiny scruff of a nest nestled in the branches. Hiccup squinted past the nest, beyond it towards the rolling hills and valley to the right of the mountain. Glowing lights, firelights of many houses burning, smoke rising from the lights.

Hiccup felt a dim realization light within him, and his mind sighed with the grateful knowledge that he was finally getting somewhere in this quest. It wasn't too far away, the town lights of Herkja. The docks wouldn't be far from there, and with it, Toothless no doubt.

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It wasn't a very long walk to the slave pen. He'd made the trip countless times in his life on Herkja, to greet the new people - people, he repeated in his mind, despite what they said. Hervi sighed, adjusted Noor's basket in his hand. She always wanted them to feel welcome, at least to their world, which was the one they'd be trapped in for now.

It was dark and there were dragon screams penetrating his ears everywhere. It pained him, not the fact that dragons were being chained, but the fact that Heather might succeed in taming them as the murdered heir had done out there on Berk - and then Rune and the Skirra VÃ©l would be invincible, and he in his small ways may never be able to change their minds.

The heaviness in his heart weighed him down and his pace slowed. He could hear the clank of metal out afar, cages being soldered together last minute, to hold the new influx of wild warriors in their midst. He looked up, squinted in the sharp moonlight to see the slave's area, cordoned off by the familiar wooden fence, the blue-white light of the night's sun casting a dreamy aura over the space. He blinked, knew it was a strange vision to get, adjusted the basket in his hands again. He got near the place finally, the ground under his feet changing from grass to hard, packed earth, hardened by the passage in and out of many, many feet. He sighed, and his eye suddenly caught the image of a little boy along the edge of the fence near him. He looked closer at his figure in the moonlight.

He was a small thing, spry, alive, his little smile bright and happy

in the center of that morbid darkness. Hervi stepped up to the posts of the pen, his eyes on the little fellow.

"Hey, kid."

The child did not look up, was still a couple yards from him, running his fingers on the fence, running while he scampered parallel to it, humming some native tune from someplace foreign, his little eyes darting along the ground as he ran.

"Child?" Hervi hummed again, kneeling down near the fence. The little kid finally looked up. His face was small, round, with eyes large and curious. He cocked his head once, looked at Hervi, a moment of uncertainty in his features. "Hey!" he suddenly shouted and ran up to the edge of the fence, sliding down on his knees towards the old man. The dust puffed from his knees and he coughed, smiled a big grin, his one front tooth missing. "My name's Iggy!" he said, perking, "and you must be a friend." He leaned back, holding on to the fence, staring at Hervi, waiting for an answer.

Hervi paused a minute, a tad unnerved by this youth's spryness. "Iggy? Where, uh, do you come from exactly, Iggy?"

"No need to small talk me, friend." The kid jumped up to squat by the fence, rolled on his heels. "I'm from no place."

Hervi raised his brows.

"Meaning I don't have a home." Iggy whistled, toned down suddenly. "My parents died . . ." He looked up at Hervi, his smile bright again. "But knowing where they came from ain't no help, neither, seeing how my dad was a knight and my mom was a Viking." His mouth pulled into a smug smile. "Doesn't that fascinate you?"

Hervi blinked, patted his hand out in an unconscious effort to settle the situation.

"It fascinated everyone else I told." Iggy rolled on his heels again, pouted his lips.

Hervi cleared his throat. "Of course it's fascinating," he said, and Iggy perked. "Really? You want to ask me about it?" His smile was infectious.

Hervi burrowed into his basket, paused as his fingers brushed the piece of bread. "You sure that won't be hard on you, to talk about it?" He peered at the kid.

Iggy slumped, sliding on the ground. "Aaaw, well, it was a long time ago, and-"

"How old are you?"

"I'm seven!" Iggy's grin widened.

"Then how long ago is a long time?" Hervi was having trouble believing that something like that wouldn't . . . traumatize a kid.

"I didn't count." Iggy curled his knees up to his chin, plucked a

snippet of grass and inspected it from behind his knees. He peeled off a corner of the blade, stuck it in his mouth. "But I'm okay . . ."

Hervi rolled out the crust of bread, handed it through the bars. "Your Norse is very good, for a foreigner."

Iggy grabbed the piece of bread, shoved it down his mouth, crumbs spilling out over his knees and the thready wool clothing he wore. "I pay attention to the stuff that goes around, I ain't that dumb." He grinned. "See? I can speak two things." Iggy rattled off something foreign to Hervi, and Iggy pulled his knees closer. "That's Latin," he explained. "My father's speech. He used to gab in that a lot."

Hervi nudged his head up, still a little taken by the little kid. To think . . . that he might be fated for child slavery. A chill ran up his spine, and he looked away, at the other new slaves behind the fence. So many figures, small short ones in the midst of large, burly, threatening ones. Some he could quickly make out as criminals, their arrogance strong in the way they held their frame and paced their step. Others, quite innocent, quiet in their movements in the dark, settling down to sleep on the barren soil, or under the eaves of a small merciful shelter. A few he could see were cowering in fear in the corners of the area, others in quiet meditation, a few with their palms pressed close together, their lips muttering something in silent, earnest prayers. He'd seen it all before, this lot of cultures and peoples, all united in this unchanging fate.

All in all, it was a good lot, he could tell. It would bring in a good sum from the sale that was happening soon. Surely the war wouldn't halt the auction? He hummed, not really sure what would happen. Rune would hate to disappoint all those merchants that came from so far to do their bidding. He looked back at the little kid still staring up at him from behind the wooden bars of the fence. Hopefully Brokk wasn't here this time, the man was cruel, and he looked specifically for such young slaves like Iggy. Said they were easier to work in the mines, easier to deal with, less chance of rebellion. A hot itching irritation scratched up his heart. Maybe his way was too slow, too careful?

"Hey, whatcha thinking?" Iggy rolled on his heels again, stared at Hervi. "You never did tell me your name, and I'd hate to keep calling you 'friend' because I got lots of them and it'd make it hard to make out who I'm talking to." He wiped his mouth suddenly, smiled and revealed a cute set of broken, yellowing teeth.

"It's Hervi." He swallowed, stood up. He needed to go visit the rest of the slaves, deliver the food and head home soon. Heather didn't like it when he stayed out too long with the slaves. "I used to be the chief of this place, before, well . . . you don't want to talk about that, do you?"

Iggy shrugged. "Sure, why not? I need to know about this spot, anyways. It's my new home, ain't it?"

Hervi looked around. She wasn't anywhere near, was she? He squatted down, Iggy perking, scooting closer to the edge of the fence.

"It was before this people invaded, I was chief of the people who

lived here, see?"

"Yeah, that makes sense. And then they got rid of you when they took over, right?"

"Essentially."

Iggy pulled up his knees again. "Yeah, I heard that story before. Sad." He leaned his chin on his knees, rocked slightly. "So you can't be chief anymore, I guess. They do things to folks so that don't happen, right?" He peered at Hervi.

The old man nodded gravely, tapped the side of his head, the slavemark burned into his skin. "Everyone understands and respects the rules. A true chief can't be defeated, and I was . . . well, now I'm working on getting us all free, the peaceful way, and I-" But he was rambling now, wasn't he? What did this little kid know, appreciate, about the dealings he was at work in, the double-sided life he was leading, that odd affection he had for the leader of their captivity, the lack of faith he had in the repeated violent efforts at freedom?

"Whatcha thinking?"

Hervi shot a look at the kid. "Iggy. . ."

"I don't like it when people don't think out loud. Makes for awfully boring conversations." He rolled again, his knees still pulled up.

"Nothing important, Iggy," Hervi hummed.

Iggy smirked. "They always say that."

"What's your full name anyway? Surely it isn't just Iggy."

"Ignazio, thanks for asking!" Iggy scrambled out of his cramped position and stood, ran his fingers over the wooden panels of the fence. Hervi squinted, saw the faint dark mark of the slavemark on the side of the little boy's face. "Ouch," Iggy whispered suddenly and Hervi jumped. "Aw, it's nothing, just a splinter." Iggy fingered his left pinkie and sucked on it. "Pain don't faze me none." He popped his finger out to grin at him.

Hervi blinked.

"People say I smile too much, is that true?" Iggy rolled on his heels suddenly, anchoring himself with his hands on the fence.

Hervi let out a sigh, shifted the basket in his hands. The Skirra VÃ©llites were thickening around him and Heather may very well be among them. He'd come back that night and talk to this child, this sparkling beacon of hope in this place. "No one smiles too much, Iggy," he said gently and patted the little kid's hand. Iggy's eyes popped wider and he smiled, his teeth not showing this time. "That's good, because I wasn't going to stop anyways." He pulled back, scampered off to the rest of the slaves, his tiny figure black in the night, vanishing into the masses assembled there, awaiting their fate.

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It was a busy night, warriors everywhere dragging dragons to cages, the night filled with dark shapes jolly or worried or stern, each one doing a job assigned to him. She had a lot on her mind, standing out in the middle of the madness, trying in some semblance to organize it all. Her eye drifted over to the slave pen, where she saw Hervi kneeling down tending to one of the smaller of the prisoners. She squinted. They were dark figures in the moonlight, silhouetted black against the deep blue of the landscape. She squinted her eyes at the old man, her and her father's own slave - those old concerns tickling up her.

He was after all, Old Chief. What if they wanted him chief again?

She felt a presence near her suddenly, didn't turn to look. "Dad?" She knew it was him. He put his hand on her small shoulder suddenly. "It's just a child, a child isn't going to inspire anything, and Hervi's not the one to revolt."

"Was I worried?" she snapped back, raising a brow.

"I know . . ." he hummed. "You don't want to have to send another slave to the execution dragons . . ."

She pursed her lips, said nothing. The Blood Dagger dragons were horrible creatures and she took no pleasure in sending any of the slave lot to their deaths, and no matter how guilty they were, even of treason, she still felt a pang in her heart whenever Hervi came back in the mornings with the report that the deed had been accomplished. It was odd, it didn't make sense to mourn the death of mere property. She clicked her tongue, a mental reproach. "Hervi will do nothing of the sort."

She looked up at Rune, noticed that his mind had by now drifted from the conversation at hand. It was one of the smaller things of his illness, a sort of flitting from topic to topic. He didn't really notice it, and it was quite subtle, but still, it was there, still there. The remnants of the injury this heartbreak had caused him.

She watched him, looking at the new constructions of cages and chains besides the town center. They stood by the base of the great mountain, Hallion Tower, where the Ring and Great Hall were hidden within its great mass. He was . . . uncomfortable, she could tell.

"Dad?" she asked, dropping her hands to her sides. A couple of Skirra VÃ©llites were coming towards her, messages probably. But she ignored them - for now.

Rune didn't turn to look at her, kept his stare on the flow of warriors around them, their dark shapes indistinguishable in the shadows of the night, the hiss and scream of dragons as they dragged them forward and down, down into the caverns, tunnels, and dungeons inside the mountain. They had long since overflowed, in the rampant capturing of wild dragons she had assigned to every able-bodied Viking and slave on the island. She wanted this thing to be successful, needed this thing to be successful. Her father hated to

turn back and leave Berk unconquered, but the dragons were a new factor, one that couldn't just be ignored.

She prodded him. "It's about training dragons, isn't it?"

He looked down at her suddenly, eyes melding into something a mix of warm and wary.

"About doing what your brother is doing . . ." She put a hand out to the warriors, staying their impatience for a moment.

Her father hummed, pursed his lips and turned to look at the new dragons. They'd never caught so many dragons of their island before. "I trust you, Heather," he said simply, the words full of doubt and yet sincerity. She blinked, knew he was trying to believe her. He hated the idea of this foreign dragon in their midst, this so-called Toothless, from that hated victim of their justice. "Why keep such a thing? Why not feed him to the dogs of the Hunt?"

She wasn't sure he understood what the black dragon meant to her - she saw something in him, that same confusion of love she felt when Rune himself found her so long ago. He'd have to understand.

Her father turned away, his frame black in the night and pacing slowly towards the mass of warriors nearer the valleyed area of the town.

Words wouldn't change his mind so much as actions. She'd prove to him that Toothless was something to be kept, that training dragons was not putting themselves lower than their enemies, but taking from them their own game and using it against them. She faced the first warrior. "Yes?" she asked.

"Two dragons we found, on the upper cliff-sides, they had something . . . different on them. . . ." The warrior trailed.

She raised a brow.

"Saddles," he said, quite matter-of-factly.

Her brows crossed and she suddenly put two-and-two together. "The Hooligans are here, aren't they? Have you contacted the ship watches?"

"Yes, nothing."

"The scouts?"

"Again, no ships."

She pursed her lips, thought it odd that Hooligan dragons would have landed on Herkja without an armada of some sort. "Were there any riders?" She looked up at the warrior, the confused concern on his face lightened now by the shaft of moonlight over his features.

"No, none. It seemed very odd. . . ."

"Look into it. You do have the dragons, though?"

"Oh, yes, of course. We captured them, quiet tame already they

were."

"Understandable."

She turned aside, waved him off to listen to the next warrior's say. So the Hooligans were here, they weren't just waiting for Rune to attack? She hummed, wondered if this changed some things. There were at the very least spies in their midst, spies without transport at least now.

She added that to the dense list of items she had to consider in this war.

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"Why don't you . . . move it . . . rabid devil, you-"

Toothless yanked harder against the pull of the insulting warrior, nearly making him lose his grip on the cord. Toothless reared as high as his back legs would take him, almost falling over backward as the ropes momentarily eased their pull on his collar. But the yanking on his neck pitched him forward again in a wicked tug of war as the leather collar strangled his throat. He tried to growl, but could only whine hotly. His feet slapped down on the cold stone floor, started moving forward again under the duress. He snorted and gave his shoulders a shake, the mustiness of the subterranean air filming over his scales and griming into the corners of the leather cords crisscrossing his body. He adjusted his eyes to the darkness within, a darkness only occasionally punctuated by the fire of torches lining the walls on either side. He narrowed his eyes at the enclosing walls, strange patterns faintly etched and painted over the chipped stone surface, patterns of men and dragons entangled in each other from the floor to the ceiling. The ropes suddenly brushed by his snout and passed by his eyes, splintering his field of vision into jagged pieces of black shadows and low ceilings and shouting men ahead of him. Eight or ten men pulling him, dragging him relentlessly forward through some tunnel underneath the mountain in the center of the island.

Ever since they unloaded him from the ship and hooked the cords into his collar, they had been hauling him towards these volcanic peaks, pulling and chafing at him even after the sun set. He faintly remembered the place on the outside - memories from so many summers ago. He could still feel the burning ache in his wings that night when he and his father landed on these peaks. Scores of days and nights of constant flying were hard for a fledgling Night Fury, especially over a sea so vast it never ended. Not many Night Furies made it across that sea, it wasn't supposed to be crossed, but his father was desperate. He almost wished they hadn't left the Cold Lands, but the slow realignment of the stars across endless nights told him they had gone too far to turn back. This land they sighted, the caves warm with molten heat, beckoned them to rest, to stay. His father insisted to go on, said he felt bad instincts about this place. But he argued to stay. In all his summers and winters since, he couldn't believe he'd ever relive that mistake.

He flicked his ear flap in a slight shiver, wondered just which cavern he had stayed in that long time ago. These people couldn't be taking him anywhere near there. Winding caverns riddled the insides of these peaks, labyrinths that could get a dragon lost if he wasn't

a native species of the place. No, they had something else in mind for him, maybe something just as terrible as that night sixty summers ago.

He lowered his head, sniffed the ground, his feet pitter-pattering on the uneven rock floor, the endless etchings of dragons and men locked in combat passing by underneath him. A feeling crept into him, an unease. Just where were they leading him? The hunt happened in the forest, right?

Doors suddenly opened ahead, a yawning blackness beyond, innumerable distant voices wafting in from the opening. He widened his eyes, caught slim shafts of moonlight and firelight filtering into the rocky space ahead and a penetrating scent tickling his nose, the unmistakable scent of dragon blood.

Alarm shot up inside him; he yanked sharper at the cords, felt panic as the ropes pulled even harder and his feet skidded on the slippery sloping surface of the stone floor. He latched his claws into a crack in the stone, lashed his tail against the stone walls for leverage, shoved his body in the opposite direction from the tug of ropes. A hail of shouting reverberated in the small dark tunnel; the collar gagged him as the ropes strung out even tauter. He buckled down against the floor, smarted as the collar shoved into the back of his skull and lodged behind his ear flaps.

"Damn you dragon. You're moving if I have to pull your head off."

_I dare you. _Toothless lashed his narrowest eyes at the warrior in front of him. Brandr, he recognized him - his glinting metal shingles and gold bracelets jangling as he whipped his stout arm around the bulking mass of cords in his fist. He twined the rope around his fist several times, taking a step closer to Toothless with each winding until he stood within arm's reach of his snout. Toothless tried growling but the sound pinched out in the tightness of his throat. He suddenly glanced at the axe inserted in the man's thick jeweled belt. A crescent of teeth marks, his own teeth marks, still blighted the metal blade. The man seemed to sense his gaze, followed it, eyed him again.

"You're going to pay for that." He turned to his comrades around him, motioned them with his ropetangled fist. "Ragnar," he motioned to his blond-stubbed warrior besides him. Toothless could feel the warrior moving past him, could sense activity behind him that he couldn't see. Brandr glanced away from him casually, the rope becoming limp as he sauntered close to Toothless. Suddenly he pumped his fist to the left, wrenched Toothless's head to the side. He yelped as he tipped forward and hands suddenly shoved up his flanks. The ropes tugged all at once, the hands pushed him from behind through the tunnel, letting go once he passed the doors. He slipped on the polished stone surface, suddenly became aware of the confining tunnel walls giving way to a vast enclosure walled by rock. Sheer stone walls all around, rising in a dome blocking out the sky. Broken windows scattered over the face of the dome, letting in fragments of stars, the faint scent of fresh air mocking him as it wafted down from so far up, so far away, out of his reach. The smell beneath his feet was stronger - he looked down, saw dark stains smeared deeply in the rock floor, splatters of blackened red fresh and unmistakable.

The roar strangled itself in his throat as he reared and yanked backwards, tried turning back, but the door shut closed, the ropes tightening on all sides and pulling him down. He lashed his tail, but the men avoided it, moved in front of him, towing him forward across the flat stone floor. He slid to the center of the ring. His head hurt, his mouth frothed with the struggle in his throat. Hands were suddenly on him, grabbing the straps over his wings and body, unfastening them.

He shot his wings out, bunched his legs and jumped airborne across the enclosure. The sudden motion knocked the revolting warriors to their feet as he flapped ahead, pulling the ropes behind him. Shouts behind, sudden loosening of the ropes as he roared at the freedom. He lost altitude, met a wall, clawed the sheer stone surface but slipped and fell down again. He jumped again, higher, leapt vertical, his front claws latching onto a flat surface high above him, the lip of the enclosure's wall. He dug his claws in, looked up but his snout met chains latticed over the ceiling, the matrix of chains separating the enclosure from the high dome farther above and beyond. He snorted blackly, flicked his head to kick a chain away from his face.

"Toothless. It's okay now."

A firm gentle voice, the voice of a girl below him. Heather. He winced, suddenly remembering the rockslide, him shielding her, protecting her, saving her. What a fool he was. He should have listened to his instincts. He knew she was bad, knew all along even when Hiccup told him to be nice. And now look at him.

"Come down, Toothless."

He growled, his back legs slipping and clawing back to regain their tentative grip on the vertical stone wall he had scaled. But he had no place to go; he was suspended between the floor and the chain-latticed ceiling. His front feet could barely hold his slim traction on the ledge above him, a ledge that seemed to open up to an even vaster room above him. He peered over, saw a warm glow of firelight flickering beyond the latticework of chains barring his path, pillars and banners half shadowed in the darkness, tables and people on the other side, their feet eye level to his snout, the boots shuffling around the rims of the ring, their voices excited as more feet gathered around the ledge near him. It was a hall like Berk's, except for this great depression in the middle, this spectacle arena he was entrapped in underneath the ceiling of chains. That's what it was. A spectacle.

And something else. He narrowed his eyes at the Hall walls far beyond the ledge he clawed, sharp shapes lining the cavern rock at regular intervals. He flinched. Twenty, thirty of them, just the heads and a stubby portion of the necks. The gaping mouth of a Whispering Death, the curling horns of a Timberjack, the flaming red of a Monstrous Nightmare. Jaws open, poised in attack, yet paralyzed in mid-motion. He almost started at the sight of the snapping jaws of a Skrill's head mounted to the far left, the first head in the line, half-hidden in the darkness. No, it couldn't be who he hoped it was. Though preserved so lifelike, defying decay, the color had faded, the purple sheen gone from the long snout and the scales caked and dusty and discolored from summers and winters exposed to the firelight and the cavern's mustiness. The eyes were black instead of yellow, a dull,

hollow, unliving blackness that stared over the Hall, stared and pointed at the arena.

He suddenly turned his eyes to the far right, to the walls engulfed in darkness there. The row of heads ended in a space of openness on the wall, a yawning black void lacking banners or sculptures or any adornment. Skari's words shot through him, ran a chill down his back.

You'll be the first of your species.

The ropes suddenly yanked him back and he lost his hold on the ledge, dropped down and landed on the hard floor. He whipped his head to the ring's center, spied the girl standing there among the warriors, their swords and axes and hammers glinting at their sides. A snarl shot from his chest as he faced the chain-mailed, fur-caped men arrayed in a semi-circle around him, their hands heaving the ropes tighter around his collar. He slapped his wings up, a bottled energy screaming inside him, a spark of hot gas spitting up from his chest. It lodged within his strangled throat. He gagged and lowered his head, clawed the splattered stains of the floor, the smell of those stains thick and crazy and sickening in his nostrils. He willed himself to calm, to stop the trapped energy inside him from exploding. He stood still, angled himself towards the circle of men ahead of him, let the ropes lighten their hold on his throat, let the gas seep into his mouth to let up some of the pressure. He felt hot froth drip from his jaws onto the stained stone.

Suddenly a warrior neared his right side, touching his harness. He lashed his head at him, sending the man bolting back and whipping out his sword.

"That won't be necessary."

He turned to the left, saw the girl standing out from the circle of men. He concentrated on the feel of the voice, snatches of words, the meaning of the human language he'd spent two years figuring out.

"He'd bite our heads off if he had the chance." The gold-banded warrior twisted the ropes around his fist, yanked them, jerked Toothless's head forward. He jerked back, almost got the warrior to stumble, his eyes burning livid.

"Stop Brandr. You've disciplined him enough." The man halted his sharp pull at the girl's curt order, her round face furrowing in displeasure. She looked at Toothless, a look of tight lips and creased, softened dark eyes. She inhaled, flipped back the long strand of dark hair over her shoulder, walked towards him. He began to edge away, then stood still. She had no weapon on her, didn't scream at him like the others. He watched her watching him, her steps slowing as she neared the left side of his head, just within arm's reach of him. Her eyes suddenly narrowed and her hand reached out towards the side of his mouth; he jerked away, but her hand followed him, touched his lower jaw briefly. She brought her hand back towards her, the fingers laced with sticky froth. "Brandr I told you."

"I did exactly your orders."

"You interpreted them."

"No dragon gives me flak."

"Just what are you trying to do - kill him?" She slapped the froth off her fingers. Toothless widened his eyes, wavered his wings slightly, slapped his tail against the stone. _So you're interested in my welfare, want to keep my head pristine for your walls. How flattering,_ he snorted as she stepped up to his left side. He shifted to his right, but the ropes radiated tight all around him, his neck meeting resistance in every direction. He felt pinned, like his head was affixed to a point in space. He flexed his jaw under the leather strap, shook his head and stood there, tolerated her as she strode back and forth on his left side, her hands touching the stirrup and the straps on him, unlatching them. The weight suddenly lifted from his back - he whipped his head to the side as best he could, saw the saddle in her arms and the stirrups dangling down. He whined, lurched to the left, caught the edge of the saddle in the slim grasp of his lips, the wretched leather strap around his mouth stopping him from grabbing it with his teeth. Her palm firmly pushed his nose back.

"Toothless, you'll be more comfortable."

I don't want to be comfortable. He pushed his snout against her hand, angled it off his nose, but the fingers pressed on him again.

"I'll get you another one. Something more-" She glanced downwards. He followed her gaze, landing on the chipped metal stirrup, its uneven surface glinting in the warm glow from the firelights up above. "More perfect."

She motioned one warrior over, handed the saddle and rigging over to him. A sudden fear welled up in his chest as the man carried the saddle and tangled leather away, the familiar scent fading. _No._ He leapt forward, fought the ropes. He screeched snarls at the retreating man, screeched and pulled and scratched at the slippery stone floor.

"Settle down, Toothless." Slim fingers suddenly latched onto his head strap. He snapped his head away, suddenly looked at her, his mind flashing. Something more than a hunt was on her mind for him. Something worse.

Just why did you take me?

"Toothless, settle down." She cocked her head up at him, kept her grip firm on his mouth strap. He stared back, sniffed hotly in her face, fanning her hair and making her eyelids flutter. But only for a moment. She locked eyes with him again, determined, unyielding eyes.

"You're not going to keep calling him that, are you?"

Toothless angled his head towards the voice, a man with short yellow whiskers moving behind the girl, hard to see because she stood so close to his line of vision.

She twitched her head a moment, blinked, gazed over Toothless. "I've yet to decide."

The man with the dragon-toothed necklace and gold bracelets and clinking metal armor gestured carelessly towards him, the metal mail clinking against his axe as he looked pointedly at Heather.

"Face it, the name sucks. If, and I say if, you manage to tame him enough to fly him again, you better rename him. Because I'm not following any Toothless into battle. You're his master now - let him know it."

Toothless froze, a sheer, maddening horror sparking in his chest. The prize dragon threats, the mounted heads, the hunt in the forest - they, she, wanted him alive? She wanted to ride him.

She wanted to be Hiccup.

He suddenly lashed his head into her body, knocked her on the floor, caught her boots in his claws. She shrieked and held her arms against his chest. Warriors encircled him suddenly. Axes and swords and hammers shot up all around him and blocked his vision of her gasping on the stained stone, but he tightened his grip on the boots, his jaws fighting the strap and the cords. He screamed at her.

How dare you think of replacing him.

Her eyes were hard on him, unafraid somehow, a firmness in her expression, like she thought she knew something he didn't know.

A gaseous hot ball welled up his throat as he curled his neck and forced his jaws as wide as the strap would let the choke on his neck stifled it, the collar crushed his windpipe and his jaws clamped shut in a sudden flurry as hands grabbed the strap on his jaws, grabbed his head. Her eyes were still steady and unnerved, a strange stolidity he could not explain.

The hot ball wedged in his mouth, sparked through his teeth. Something seething white hot suddenly struck below his neck - an axe - slashed into the hide of his chest. He yelped, reared against the clambering, suffocating ropes and hands and bodies and axes and hammers and swords. Smacks of hammers hitting him on all sides, thuds of bodies against him on all fronts, but they couldn't contain the pure rage detonating within him, the cracking, fiery, exploding fury.

Fury, black fury, blacker than night

18. Chapter 16: Closing In

a/n: Hope your day is going well! A day late, oops XD

View the illustration at the official webpage. Put a period where the dashes are: [howtotrainyourdragon2 - thecomicseries - com](http://howtotrainyourdragon2-thecomicseries-com)
>or at my deviantArt gallery: [inhonoredglory - deviantart - gallery - 38855965](http://inhonoredglory-deviantart-gallery-38855965)<p>

* * *

><p>How to Train Your Dragon II
>The Dragon Whisperer

**Act II
>A World Shattered
**

**Chapter 16
>Closing In
**

Toothless heaved a breath, clenched his teeth as the pain pulsed through his chest again, only one image flashing through his mind and giving him any amount of relief from the unrelenting misery. That voice he longed to hear, that happy gentle one different from all the others.

He locked the whine in his throat, quieted himself, hated to look weak right now. He could feel the slash from the axe was more serious than he had thought. The burning sensation cut through the right side of his chest, slanted upward below his neck, ended near the base of his right wing. He lay still on the floor, angled his left side to carry the brunt of his weight, let his right side lie limp on the cold stone surface. He nosed the floor, settled his body farther into a corner of the arena. The cold stone soothed his snout and his undersides, cooled the sting of the bruises covering his body. The hammers had pummeled hard on him, hard and long until his seething rage burnt out, until the torture in his side screamed at him to lie down. He was glad when the men left him, gave him time to gauge just how bad off he was.

He glanced down towards his right side, sniffed at the warm sensation trickling down him. Wet streams glistened darker black against his scales, spurted down his chest, over his leg, staining down into the hard rock under him, the black pools melding into the stains already soaked into the arena floor. He turned his head down towards the sparkling blackness streaming down his side, tried to crane his snout towards the wound, but the motion wrenched his chest, throbbed through his side and right wing. He whipped his head forward, narrowed his eyes as the pain seared through him, sharp and biting. He let out a ragged breath, figured it wasn't much use trying - the horrid mouth strap wouldn't allow him the decency to lick his wounds anyway.

He glanced across the floor in the center of the ring. The same splattered stains glistened fresh on the rocks, the imprints of boots and his own claws marring the red swaths. Fire burned inside him at the sight of the blood, his blood, soaking into the rock just like all the others who had gone before him.

He snorted, wrinkled his nose. To be so incapacitated, so vulnerable. The idea of moving, let alone escaping, felt painful, and he didn't even want to imagine his chances on the hunt now. After he attacked that girl, mercy would be the last thing on their minds.

He peered upward, past the lattice of chains crisscrossing the ceiling towards the rim encircling the enclosure. Growing clusters of people stood along the ledge, shoving past each other, peering past the chains, their voices thick with excitement as they gawked at him. Children clambered towards the edge, crawling on their knees, their little shouts echoing delight across the chamber above. Girls and boys craned their heads over the ledge above him, eyes full of pleasure, as if spectators of an amusing game down below. The shouts

sickened him, churned his guts and twisted his pain into shards deeper than the wound itself.

This was what he hated about humanity.

Hiccup, where are you?

The rowdy boys, from the burly teens down to the crawling small ones, had that strange thrill in their yelling chants, the way they leaned over the edge with eager hunger in their eyes. He lashed his head at them, snarled viciously despite the sting in his shoulder, but their whoops roared even higher. He cocked his head at them, suddenly figured they must have watched similar things before. They were waiting for him to lash back, _wanted_ him to lash back. He eyed the kids' heads dangling high above him, the ceiling chains crossing their faces. He wanted to scale the wall and scratch their smiles off. But of course he couldn't, and they'd just love for him to try, wouldn't they? The loathing curled inside him, curled in deep rumblings around his chest. He lay his head on the stone and swept his tailfin across his face, blocking out the revolting humans from his sight. _Go away. I'm not entertaining any of you._

The black flat panel of his tailfin shielding his eye sparked an image in his mind, a small hand reaching out and a little freckled face eager and curious, looking at him. That face. He suddenly yearned to see it behind his tail, looking at him, reaching for him, stroking him. That face wouldn't let them enjoy his misery, he'd fix his pain somehow. Like when he was sick and he stayed close to him, lay his head on him until he felt better. But that was the past. He flicked his tail up, spied underneath it in vain, the tarnished stone emanating emptily across the floor. Hiccup could be hurt himself for all he knew, amidst that dreadful destruction of Berk. The last he saw of him, he fell into the sea. If he hadn't known the kid could swim, he'd have lost his mind by now. All through the voyage he had reviewed that last image in his mind, trying to figure out what happened. He could plainly see Hiccup was trying to land on the ship and save him just like two summers ago, except this time he failed.

He thumped his tail hard against the stone, jerked slightly as the motion sent a splinter of pain through his shoulder. Hiccup never fails. A sudden realization hit him, swept through his back and took hold of his chest. How could he not have seen it. Of course Hiccup wouldn't stand for it, wouldn't just let them take him away. He'd try again.

Toothless suddenly rose to his feet, the searing sharpness cutting into his right front leg and piercing his shoulder, his wing, his chest, but his head pointing up towards the rows of people above him, searching the faces. No, he was delirious, dreaming, that face wouldn't be here. He couldn't be here.

His glance suddenly landed on a familiar face, a round face of dark eyes and furrowed brows framed by long, dark, disheveled hair. Heather. He snarled, winced as he stepped on his right foot. The last thing she was going to do was fly him, the last thing. To think she'd even try renaming him. His snarl leveled out into a low grumble, his wings flexing on impulse. Hiccup wouldn't stand for that, if he ever knew, he wouldn't. He must be coming.

I'll wait for you. He settled back down on the floor, curled his tail around himself, smarted at the renewed throbbing hitting him, but it didn't feel so bad now. At least, it would keep him awake, just in case tonight was the night. The pain must have been playing with his mind, but he couldn't shake the feeling, the hope welling inside him. Something else crept in as he laid his head down on the stone, the glistening moisture of his own blood sticking to the underside of his chin. They didn't attack Berk for nothing. Whatever was going to happen, he'd have to protect that boy, whisk him as far away from this wretched place as possible. Because Hiccup would really need him then.

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"If only you people listened to me. . . we wouldn't be in this mess, and that dragon would be dead and gone right now." Brandr's voice was hot and angry.

Heather grimaced, her mind smacking. Her council can be so stupid.

She bent down, clutched her stinging ankles through the thickness of her boots, the Night Fury's claw marks still fresh on the fur and leather. They'd dragged her out from under that beast just in time - just before the gas and fire came spilling out of those jaws, just as that hate in the dragon's eyes came to full climax. It was like that time in the Hall of Berk, when he snarled at her and they faced off and the kid had to separate them. But she thought things had changed, that the dragon had learned to like her, certainly enough to fly her to the ship and trust her with that.

But taking him away from his home would not be easy on him; small wonder he snarled at her throughout the voyage. There would be brief relapses into his wild state, of course. He was a dragon after all and he wouldn't take kindly to this treatment, even if it was a temporary and necessary discipline. But this, this might be more than that. That eye had murder in it.

Her council saved her, had carried her up to the Hall, the flat ring above the arena. It was amazing how deep those Night Fury claws could go. She shifted her weight on the wooden boards of the bench, her back scratching uncomfortably against the wooden table behind her. Her head was dizzy as she bent down to her knees. She smirked, couldn't stand that feeling.

She glanced sideways, spied Brandr still pacing near her, his hand still welded around his axe handle, the shining metal blade dripping red along the Hall floor. The man worked from his emotions too much. She listened, tried to hear the sound of a screaming dragon down below, but she only caught the hum of dragons outside, far away and sharp. The Night Fury was quiet, down below, in the arena, his growls had subsided, dangerously subsided.

"You didn't kill him." She snapped around to look at Brandr, her voice intentionally sharp and critical. She flung her hair away from her eyes, but the black strands slipped back across her line of vision.

Brandr glanced at her, and turned away, went back to his pacing, a scowl on his irked face. Gamal rose from some seated position nearby,

strode into the thick crowds of people surrounding the arena a couple yards away. He pushed through until they fell away in recognition of his authority, allowed him to peer along with the rest of them down into the deep depression below in the center of the vast domed Hall. A moment, then he turned back, walked back out, started for her.

She rose up, firmed her frame.

"He's alive," he said simply, and stroked his graying whiskered beard. He moved off to her left, and sat down on the bench next to her. The bench creaked and pained under the weight. "This creates complications, Heather," he hummed.

"Perhaps," she said, out of the corner of her mouth. She kept her eyes away from him, and bent down again, scrutinized her boots and the distinct claw marks still imprinted on the leather, surprisingly deep for such a short moment the Night Fury pinned her down. He had taken her by surprise, it was true, and though she wouldn't admit it, her plans were now shivering, uncertain. Would the dragon take to her?

Gamal stood up and joined the rest of the council.

It was too soon to judge that. Despite what the council would have her believe. They never wanted dragons, anyway, and if it was something she learned from her uncle's son, it was how bull-headed some people can be. They needed to trust her, and she needed to trust herself - that this plan can still work out.

She glanced upward, realized her warriors had been arguing all this time, the circle of ten clustering around with two men in the center.

"Your insults are enough to make sane men go crazy." Ragnar's hand was flung in mid-motion, the firelight glinting off his helmet and mail as he leaned forward in earnest. Brandr gestured wildly back at him with his axe-free hand.

"And I suppose you'd just let that dragon kill our one and only heir."

She smirked. Arguments never got anyone anywhere.

Ragnar's voice was hot. "You wanted to kill him since the beginning, despite Heather's orders."

"You can't say I'm wrong - dragons are killers, bloodlust waiting to happen. I don't know where you've been, but in my tribe, we've killed these beasts. What of this training garbage I don't know."

"You watch your mouth-" Heather snapped.

"Heather's ideas are not garbage."

She whirled to the right, saw her father moving into the mass of warriors. The tight circle of men broke suddenly, their faces taken aback somewhat, as if they realized they had stepped into something they shouldn't have.

Which certainly served them right.

They let in the darkness from the far reaches of the Great Hall, from across the vast oval curving around the arena depression in the middle of the Hall. An ornate grand chair stood besides tall patterned banners screening over the expanse of the black dome above them. Her father was a beautiful tower, looking down towards her, the strands of white creasing his beard brightly in the warm must and color of the firelights and his white fur cape smacking reflections of orange and yellow from the burning fires. The cape slouched sadly with his shoulders, his body heaving with every labored step.

Everyone looked to Rune, awaiting his next words. But he merely nodded at them, his eyes full of meaning and the simple statement that the conversation was closed. She smiled at him, knew she had an admirable father.

"Shouldn't you lie down?" she whispered, seeing him wince with a step.

He looked at her, eyed her answer. Of course it was a no. "You're not risking your life like that anymore," he said slowly, quietly, his real thoughts on the matter.

She looked past him, at the council, beginning to break up awkwardly.

"It takes time, Dad, to train a dragon."

"I realize that, I just. . . I hope this dragon is the right one for you, that's all. You did say it was loyal. What if it doesn't transfer that loyalty to you?"

She smirked, didn't plan on that sort of moral dilemma in a dragon. "Don't worry, Dad," she whispered. "It's just a dragon."

He looked at her, quizzical and doubtful. He never liked the idea, and certainly the thought that she would take for herself the dragon of the cursed heir. "The hunt is always open, just remember that," he said.

"I know," she hummed, smiling gently, but she wasn't planning on that anytime soon.

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The meeting area was a damp old spot, and Ruffnut hated it. Tuffnut was humming some stupid tune, getting on her nerves.

Seriously, what was new?

"Shut it, Tuff," she snapped, lolled her head onto her palm again, as she sat crookedly on the log, her one arm jutting into her knee. Really, why'd he have to go doing that, now of all times? Normally, she'd just let it go, the irritation was exciting and put some spunk in her life, but nowâ€¦ really Tuff? They had returned from their fruitless reconnaissance hours ago to the meeting place, finding nothing except more decapitated trees, more gaping holes in the ground, more foreign clawprints in the dirt, but no town. And no Hiccup and Astrid. She had some bad feelings about this whole thing,

and for once she was actually concerned. Amazing, she thought, but it was the truth.

"There's really no need for us to get mad, is there?" Fishlegs said suddenly, twiddling his thumbs nervously, looking up at the trees and the morning light drifting through them.

"When's a good time?" Ruffnut lolled out of the side of her mouth. In some ways, she was looking forward to some action, instead of this stupid sitting around waiting. She wanted to do something, wash out that irked sort of . . . was it fear?

Of course not.

A Thornston relishes fear.

Tuffnut moaned, rolled over on his back, his helmet pulled down over his eyes and crossed his arms over his chest, leaning on the log under her. "We've been waiting for over four hours," he slurred.

Snotlout, sitting besides her, shook his head. "Those kids should be back by now, I mean come on, how long does it take an injured boy and a girl to find nothing?"

Ruffnut peered at him, raised a brow. It was a little cruel way to put things, even for Snotlout.

"Hey, Hiccup was stabbed." Fishlegs had his innocent voice on. "Maybe it wasn't a good idea to let just him and Astrid go by themselves. Maybe they need help or something . . ."

"Astrid can take care of herself," hummed Ruffnut. She was a tough girl, the best, and she was nuts about Hiccup, so she wouldn't just let him get hurt or anything. Ruffnut leaned her head on her hand again. If they were gone this long, she was almost sure they found something. She was tempted to go out and look for them, but Snotlout had the amazingly smart idea of waiting - it fit with his cowardice, but honestly, it made sense anyway. They wouldn't find them in this forest, and Hiccup did say for them to wait here at the meeting spot.

So here they sat.

She wondered what happened to Toothless anyway . . . the poor thing. And Belch and Barf - why'd they go flying off like that? Oh, right, the gigantic monster thing. They should be better than that. She puffed a sigh, looked down at her brother.

There was a rustle in the bushes suddenly and Ruffnut perked, lay a hand on the log, leaned up.

"Hiccup? Astrid?" Fishlegs was shimmying over towards the sound, pushing branches of bushes aside.

"Wait-" Ruffnut got up. It didn't feel like it was . . . human. "Fishlegs!"

The growl came now, that fierce threatening roar. She got to her feet and, her brother running ahead of her, stopped behind Fishlegs. She

gasped.

The dragon was ugly - nothing like the beauty that was a Zippleback. Those teeth, why was his mouth so thin and huge like that? The white enamel poking out in an unruly mess, the snout a dark, uneven black, spots of red like maybe he had a messy lunch or something. And the horn at the end of his snout - white and charred, like it'd been through a fire. He hissed at them again, his body half-covered in the vines and greenery, like the thing was afraid to come out, despite its ugliness. The eyes were big and golden, blinking at them a little too much.

"You got a twitch or something?" Tuffnut spat, stepping in front of Fishlegs and trying to shoo it.

"I think that's a really bad idea, Tuffnut, if you don't mind my saying . . ." Fishlegs pulled Tuff's shoulders back, started backing away. The dragon clawed the moist earth with a curled toe. Fishlegs bubbled, "Maybe we should, you know, leave it alone-" He let go of Tuff suddenly and scampered backwards. "Run!" he shouted. The creature hissed again, his eyes bigger as he watched the Viking teen flee. Ruffnut rolled her eyes and grabbed her brother, turning back through the brambles. The dragon got a bigger roar going, and she could feel it step out of the bushes, its heavy step making her realize the thing was much bigger than she bargained for. "Where's Snotlout?" she asked suddenly.

Tuffnut stumbled, slapped her hand away and righted himself, faced the escaping direction. "You think he hung around?"

Ruff smiled, despite herself. "Naw, he wouldn't would he?" She looked back, saw the dragon gaining on them. Maybe it was time to be afraid? She let out a yell, dashed past her brother, slid down a bramble-covered slope, branches sticking up her sides and sliding past her. She grabbed her braids, held them for a moment, and leapt over a random stack of bushes and junk. She looked back, her loosed braids whirling around her head. "Tuff?!"

He slapped into her suddenly. "You think I'd let you get ahead?" He pounded on forward and she jumped. "Hey!" she shouted and ran to catch him. The forest ran by her in a mad race of red and brown. It was like a challenge, dodge the rocks and logs as fast as you can and don't trip. It was crazy, and she was sure they were out of danger by now. Up ahead she spotted Fishlegs and Snotlout suddenly, paused and looking at them nervously. Snotlout had a plaster of leaves on him and Fishlegs was poking his head from behind a tree trunk.

She turned back, huffed a breath, realized she was dead tired. The forest was quiet behind them, pretty still. "We're okay now, right?" her brother sputtered, his own voice uneven from too much breathing.

"I've been watching, and I think, I think so . . ." Fishlegs' voice was shaky.

Ruffnut peered back. "Of course it's okay." She inhaled, stepped forward, and leaned on the tree trunk behind which Fishlegs was hiding. Her brother stood out in the open, crossed his arms. "Well, what are you waiting for - I'm heading back."

"Back?!" It was Snotlout.

"Sure, they're waiting for us. You afraid?"

"No, why should I be afraid?"

"Then . . ." Tuff leaned over to the side, peered behind the tree.
"Where are you?"

Ruffnut snickered, ran the end of her shoe around in the dirt in front of her. There were tracks here - of some small creature. Maybe Terrors? Did Herkja have those, too? Earlier that day, when they were all out looking for any signs of that sordid life known as Skirra VÃ©llites, they came across huge holes in the ground which Fishlegs promptly pointed out as the sign of Whispering Deaths, those huge burrowing snakes of a dragon. That was enough to give them pause, and now this mystery creature?

Pride got Snotlout to come along, back with them to the meeting spot. Fishlegs was still cautious, ever careful. An odd orange glow of light dappled the area, coming through the leaves and coloring the fern faces and boulders.

"What happened to you?" came a voice, Astrid's. Ruffnut looked up, saw her coming through the greenery, Hiccup leaning on her, Astrid's arms around his waist.

"What's happened to him?" Tuffnut asked suddenly, getting in front of her and stepping ahead quickly.

"I'm okay, really-" Hiccup's faint voice perked suddenly and she got herself around Tuffnut to see, winced at the stain of red on the battered bandage on Hiccup's shoulder. Hiccup coughed into his fist.
"I'm just a little tired, that's all."

"Tired nothing," Astrid snapped, grabbing his waist tighter to hold him up.

"Ach," Hiccup groaned.

"Where were you?" Snotlout pouted. "Some wild dragon just almost killed us." Ruffnut shook her head.

Hiccup looked up at him, made an odd tired and irritated expression before trying to hop out of Astrid's grip. "In a new forest - I wouldn't be surprised. This place has dragons I don't think Berk has even seen." Hiccup went back to wincing at his shoulder. "You're okay now, I take it."

Snotlout shut up quickly, sulked.

Ruffnut jabbed her brother and he smiled goofily at her.

"You're not going anywhere, Hiccup," Astrid cut in, blissfully ignorant - purposefully, Ruffnut thought - on the spat about the dragon.

"Just let me sit down," Hiccup gasped.

"Well, fine, I need you to relax."

Ruff watched Hiccup wince and sit down on the log she had been moping on for the morning. "Yeah, how is he, anyway?" She motioned a hand towards Hiccup.

Astrid gave her a look, something serious and almost critical. "He pushes himself too much-"

"I don't."

"Hiccup, you do. You didn't need to go up there on that tree, I could have done it just fine."

Hiccup sighed sharply and Astrid put her knee on the log, leaned over him and ripped off the bandage from Hiccup's shoulder. Hiccup got a pained look on his face, and looked up to her. "It's due for a change," she hummed and looked over at the rest of them, a convicted nod in her head. "We found the town, that way." She jolted her head to one side.

Ruffnut and the rest of them followed her eyes towards the sunrise's direction. "_Finally_, progress!" Snotlout gasped.

"Let's do some damage, pronto." Tuff punched his hands together, looked at Fishlegs, who jumped and waved his hand randomly. "We came up empty." His voice was apologetic.

Hiccup shook his head. "That's okay," he hissed, as Astrid took out a fresh cloth from the bag she'd brought along. The boy looked down at his shoulder, the chapped red stains on it, and Ruff pursed her lips to see him hold back a gasp of pain. The guy really had it hard. First his leg two years ago, and now getting stabbed. Who singled him out for all the physical impairments?

Fate was odd like that. She'd stuck her and her brother together, the two most unlikely pair, so go figure with her decisions.

Hiccup and Astrid were mumbling to each other now, Hiccup saying things about his injury. The name "Heather" came out sometimes, from Astrid's lips in heated, not-so-muted anger, and from Hiccup, a calm, a strange sharp calm.

Ruffnut pursed her lips, nudged her brother. This was seriously a time they needed to kick some butt. They could just check out that town right now.

"Huh?" Tuffnut turned to her.

"We're not doing any good here. . ." she whispered, got a glint in her eye.

"Oh, oh, yeah. . ." Tuff caught her drift instantly, poked Snotlout in the ribs and started angling away with her towards the thick of the forest.

That was the one nice thing about a twin.

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Hiccup sensed the kids leaving, didn't quite know why. . .

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"Hiccup, look at me." Astrid pulled his face to face hers.

"What?"

She gasped, exasperatedly. "You're thinking too much." She went back to the bandage, mulled her hand around with the herb concoction she made a few hours earlier. She pulled the fresh cloth taut, putting pressure on the injury. Hiccup winced. He looked out, saw that he couldn't locate the other teens anymore. They mentioned something about a new dragon. It's not that he was afraid of that, dragons he could handle, but . . . he didn't have time for those things now. Sure the place was full of interesting things and he was irked that he had to ignore the doubtless abundance of creatures on the island. "You saw those tunnels?" he asked, absent-mindedly.

"You mean the Whispering Deaths?"

"Fishlegs can get quite carried away, can't he?" He hissed through clenched teeth as she pulled one more time. He tried to be casual.

"Yeah, took almost two grown men to pull him away from exploring that thing." Astrid patted his shoulder, paused. "Well, maybe not grown men."

Dad. Hiccup smirked. "Or men at all. . ."

Astrid looked at him, a seriousness in those beautiful blue eyes. It'd been forever since he was calm enough just to look at her, sane enough to just appreciate the loveliness that was his companion in the shenanigans of life. What happened to all the simplicity? By this time, in a beautiful morning like this, post-Induction - the thought made him shiver - they might have been going on a date on Toothless or something. Toothless. Why did all the words bring back hard memories?

What became of Induction now? His father . . . what became of him? The war was tough, he'd come out here to look for him, and the kids found him first and now he was here, on enemy ground, and the chief didn't even have a clue. Which really wasn't new, the man never really did pay attention to him, wanted him much . . . since the beginning, apparently.

But what of the two years past? They meant something, and Stoick was trying. Of course he was trying, but he still doubted him. Because it was true to some extent. Why was life so messed up?

And the way he trusted the Skirra VÃ©l, his old brother and his tribe. . . . It had always been Hiccup's philosophy to see the other side of things, that life and people were not who they seemed to be.

Apparently it worked both ways - someone can be evil without you knowing it. His father was wrong to trust that belief this time. Hiccup looked down at his shoulder, the clean white bandage on it, rubbed in green from the herb mixture she had slapped on.

She had been in his room, and his father had trusted her. He bit his lip, something hot and angry suddenly piquing in the back of his mind. It was something foreign to him, and he was suddenly confused.

"You're thinking about Heather?" Astrid's voice was quiet, and Hiccup glanced up at her.

"I've never been stabbed before," he hummed, trying to make light of it.

Something dark clouded her eyes, and he sensed that she might also be thinking what he was thinking, whatever confusion it was. But with her, the way she was so defensive of him, she didn't usually stand for people kidding him anymore, how much more almost killing him?

"You won't be stabbed again, be sure of that," she hummed, conviction in her voice, edging on hate. His nerves played inside of him; he didn't like these emotions.

"Well, I'm not planning on it," he said quietly. She avoided his eyes, sniffed, gathered up the random supplies she had spilled out on the grass next to the log. He looked out at the forest, tried not to think about it, watched the falling light spilling from the leaves above, the dark green pine needles and the light green ferns and the crumbles of earth covered in moss and vines. The kids were gone. He knew they had left, but now he got the feeling they had really _left_, and were doing something . . . unplanned.

"Where's everybody?" he asked suddenly.

"Hm?" Astrid paused, looked at him, whirled around suddenly. "Fishlegs?" she called.

"I think they went someplace. . ." He got to his feet, and Astrid grabbed him suddenly. "I can walk, Astrid."

She glared at him. "Fine." She let him go and stepped forward. She exhaled irritably. "Now we have to find _them_."

Hiccup crossed his brows. He had a funny feeling he knew where they'd gone, didn't have any proof. But with Tuff and Ruff irking to get something done, and the way they ran into trouble head-on, and Snotlout wanting to be a hero, and Fishlegs coming along because everyone else was, he had a strange notion that . . . call it intuition.

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For a man gone missing an entire day in a storm, Stoick sure wasn't taking things easy. Frankly, Gobber was worried.

The roiling clouds of all day had been covered by the blanket of night, but the thick rain still pummeled in the gusts of wind slapping against the solid edifice of the Great Hall. The slick steps up the Hall choked with pressing throngs of Hooligans as Gobber muttered under his breath and shoved his peg leg faster. He glanced up at the swinging fur cape ahead of him, the figure racing up the stairs two steps at a time at speeds he hadn't thought that hulking

body was capable of. He grunted and hit the wooden prosthetic harder against the stone steps. He doubted Stoick had even eaten anything the entire day, which hardly seemed possible.

"Yer'd think I was the fellow lost at sea."

"I wasn't lost."

"Spitelout would be mighty glad to hear that."

"Don't get me started on him." The matted fur cape whirled, the wet tangled strands of beard flying back to face him. "That brother of mine should still be out there looking for my son - I should still be out there."

The fiery eyebrows shooting back at him didn't surprise him. Gobber tapped his helmet, took a step up, level with Stoick. "Spitelout's only using his head. No use losing a chief in the midst of war."

"What about a future chief Gobber? What are we, a bunch of yellowbellies afraid of a little lightning and wind? Even those kids are still out there." A frustrated sigh, the creased moist face turning away from him, continued onward up the steps. Gobber huffed his breath, remained silent, could see the fists balling up underneath the soaked arm bands. Stoick hadn't been in a peachy mood ever since he had been herded back to Berk against his will. He could hardly blame Spitelout and Phlegma and Halldorr for thinking he'd gone mad, refusing to return, driving the exhausted Thornado several times into the waves, screaming Hiccup's name at the top of his lungs through the wind and rain for hours on end. To be endangering the search parties and himself without stop and without shelter for so long in the storm, without a single sign of anything to go on. It wasn't like they were stopping the search, others were replacing the tired rescuers every couple hours.

"You can't fly forever Stoick."

"Says who."

"Your tribe says who. A chief's got that little thing called delegation at his fingertips."

"My son's not a delegating matter."

"He's a resourceful lad. I'm sure he's hunkering down in that ship of his, you know, the latest and greatest thing to come off the Hooligan shipyards. You raved that master war machine's praises like the sum of yer son's achievements."

"That flimsy deathtrap?" Stoick upped a brow at him incredulously, turned and spat over the edge of the stairs. Gobber upped his brows back at him.

"Yeah, flimsy's one of metal's better-known traits. Take it from a seasoned expert," Gobber thumbed his chest, but Stoick was not amused.

"I'm talking sails Gobber. In the plural."

"You're not still sore about that."

"He just plain ignored my objections, just had to keep tinkering and festooning the thing with sails. Drakkars have subdued the seas perfectly fine with one sail, perfectly fine, but no, he had to do it his way. I bet that thing's been flung by the wind and shoved under the sea by now."

"Ah, you're just a fretting parent dreaming up the worst case scenario."

"You're right I am. You wouldn't understand."

"Let's keep my childless life out of this, shall we? You know how I feel about the kid."

Stoick slumped his shoulders, the soggy fur cape drooping even lower and heavier, his boots plodding up the rain-slicked steps. Gobber felt bad for him, could see Stoick briefly looking away from him, knew his friend wanted to take back his untactful outburst. He was just upset, they all were upset. Gobber hobbled closer besides him.

"Let's imagine a brighter possibility for a change. Hiccup's ship didn't overturn, he's not lost, sick, bleeding, frostbitten, swallowed by sea monsters or whatever other calamity yer think has befallen him. Maybe he's even made it to Herkja - it's a distinct possibility, you've got to admit sheer stubbornness is a mighty force."

Stoick shot a glare at him. "You call Herkja the bright side? My brother's bandits would just love to murder him again. That fool boy - all for one single solitary dragon. I mean, there's hundreds of dragons here - they all need his help if it's dragons he's worried about. And I was going to go after Toothless and the whole Skirra VÃ©llite lot myself - I just needed time."

Stoick grunted something hot and thudded past the towering twin doors of the Hall, plunged into the rippling and murmuring masses of warriors filling the Hall from one end to the other. Gobber limped after him, the warm cast of torchlights flickering hastily across the vast expanse and dancing along the carved curves of dragons and men etched in the walls as the wind ripped inside through the great exposed slit between the open doors that reached nearly to the ceiling. Stoick's squared, stone shoulders whipped around, his hands rising, motioning the last of the people inside, shutting the doors, cutting off the wind. The hands lingered on the door frames.

"If he ever lands on Herkja, I swear I'll just wring his neck with my bare hands. And then ground him for life."

"Yeah, well, _that_ system of discipline worked beautifully before."

The weary green eyes momentarily met his before turning to the multitudes of warriors crowded around and beyond the fireplace, the loud hum of their conversation hushing as the Hooligan chief marched up to the apex of the pit, spoke a gentle word to Phlegma and Bertha before taking his position in the midst of the Great Hall. Gobber strode up after him, melded into the line of warriors following

Stoick up to the fire circle. The War Council circled around Stoick near the fire, each hovering around the chief on the ready if he required their input. Spitelout, second-in-command, drummed his fingers on the table to Stoick's left; Phlegma the Fierce, organizer of troops, flanked Stoick's right; Halldorr, the head strategist, to Phlegma's right; Gandalf, munitions expert, on Spitelout's left; while Sven, supply overseer, and Hoark, enemy reconnaissance, arrayed themselves on either end of the circle.

Only one tentative member of the Council unaccounted for: Hiccup, head of dragon forces.

Gobber sighed, picked at his loose tooth. After nights of discussion, it was a modest, apt title they agreed upon. Nothing too beyond the boy's capabilities; in fact, just the perfect niche for him to grow into his role as warrior and future leader of the tribe. Just round him out in the basics of battle, Stoick had told him, and the rest would be dragons. Of course, if he told the kid that, he'd be liable to forget studying war and leadership at all, just bury himself in his dragon obsession. As it was, maybe the kid just didn't have it in him, even as head of the dragon forces. Stoick was right - the boy had abandoned every injured dragon on Berk just to save one. A noble thing, but not the actions of a leader. Stoick, for all his bluster and resistance of Spitelout to come home, he knew that deep inside Stoick came back willingly, that he knew his tribe needed him, that he couldn't just think of his needs alone, however dire. The war preparations, the readying of his warriors, the overseeing of ship repair - even the growing concern over the missing teens on search and rescue. The way Stoick looked at Spitelout drumming his fingers on the table, how he spoke a word to Phlegma and Bertha a moment before - he could tell Stoick was thinking about their children too, now lost at sea in the search for his runaway son. As much as Stoick wanted to be out there, he had a responsibility to them all in this Hall tonight. His own love had to be put aside for the welfare of his people. It was a singular, hard duty, reserved for the chief.

A distinct rustling broke Gobber's musings, made his head jerk towards the circular table around the firepit. A cracked parchment, a map, unfurled across the table surface, Stoick's big hands smoothing the corners down as they tried to recur. Berk cowered in the lower left corner, a big expanse of nothingness radiating from it, with only a scatter of craggy isles culminating in the biggest of them all in the top right corner, a jut of land labelled Herkja. He could feel Stoick staring keenly at that corner, burning a hole in that ancient parchment with the fire of his gaze.

His voice boomed across the Hall. "Warriors, you know why we're gathered here tonight. You know your objective. I've waited to get you ready, to find the missing, to repair the damage and to mend the injured - but the wait's over. By morning light, we sail for Herkja. Prepare yourselves for war.

19. Chapter 17: Madness at Sea, Division on

a/n: I liked this chapter, I had fun with it this time, and I got my muse back for some of it, which felt great!

View the illustration at the official webpage. Put a period where the dashes are: [howtotrainyourdragon2 - thecomicseries - com](http://howtotrainyourdragon2-thecomicseries.com)

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><p>How to Train Your Dragon II
>The Dragon Whisperer

**Act II
>A World Shattered
**

**Chapter 17
>Madness at Sea, Division on Land
**

The storm was breaking now, the buffeting winds subsiding and the rain only a gentle misting upon the fleet of Hooligan warships. A great tear in the clouds spilled out brilliant sunrays glistening along the endless sea surface, the waves calmer now and lapping against the drakkars' hulls. Great lines of ships spread out laterally on either side of the lead ship, an uncommon formation for Stoick, chosen specifically to cover the widest surface area of the ocean between Berk and Herkja. It was still possible to find his son along the way to battle, perhaps also encounter the lost search party of the kids. But even with the lifting of the storm and an orchestrated search line of his entire fleet combing the waters from horizon to horizon, not a trace of anything was found, not even the broken remnants of a shipwreck if that was his son's fate. The sun was already lowering considerably behind the clouds, sure to near the western horizon in several hours, and he didn't relish sailing in the dark, blind to the watery expanse and any sight of that metal boat he'd been yearning to spot. He hated to reach Herkja before he found Hiccup and the kids, hated to force his mind on war when they or his son could be lost or dead at sea. He had to find him. Hiccup couldn't have already reached Herkja, could he?

Stoick grasped the edge of the ship's wall, surveyed across the vast vista, the color of the waters wavering, changing, along the line of the horizon, from the familiar deep blue of Berk's seas to a lighter gray-green of foreign waters. Strange streaks of black tainted the whitewater running underneath the ships, an oily, shimmering blackness he'd witnessed only a few times in his maritime travels. Usually very far out to sea, near evening, among foreign waters such as this, and always, sea dragons weren't far away. He squinted through the rushing waters, trying to glimpse a sight, just one sight, of anything underneath the waves. They never did get very good glimpses of the small-winged creatures, shy they seemed, never much of a threat. The Scauldrons and Thunderdrums were more harrowing monsters of the sea, but fortunately, he had one of those with him now. He glanced up to the right, Thornado dozing pleasantly on the deck, his massive frame stealing almost half the space for the people as he slept off his exhaustion from the hours of flying he had endured in the storm. Other dragons, the ones who'd survived the slaughter, the Monstrous Nightmares and the Nadderheads, Zipplebacks and Gronckles, were perching on the masts or taking off and soaring in the air with their riders, some part of the search parties for his son, others making advance reconnaissance ahead of the war fleet, ready to report back to him with sightings of land or the enemy. A slight smile mused on his lips, despite the tiredness invading his own bones and wearying his standing. The Skirra VÃ©llites, his brother, had given them a hard blow, caught them by surprise, but

just wait for the Hooligans now. He'll see his brother face to face all right, when he arrived on the shores of Herkja leading a whole dragon fleet upon the wretched place. Rune was going to get his war all right, get right what was coming to-

An ear-splitting roar suddenly broke around him. He grabbed the rim, the sound awfully deep and strong in his ears. It was that dragon he heard a few days ago, that dragon which scared their dragons way back before war began. "_Men_, hold!" he boomed out, instinctively, as the horrid noise screamed across the ships and pulled taut the sails. The ocean came alive with writhing, churning water dragons, flashes of wings and strange flickering lights and screams, screams mingling with the flying dragons, with the shocked shouts of his own warriors.

He swept his hand behind him, trying to get the message to his men. He lost his balance as the deck shuddered under him, pitched starboard, men yelling and dragons suddenly taking off and fleeing. Even Thornado's great body jolted to life and launched into the air, the deck thrust into the waters with his force and the waves smacking into Stoick's body, hitting the deck. His boots slipped in the sliding layers of water shimmering down the deck. Another deafening boom - a thunder that rattled his mind and spasmed the very foundations of the deck. He whirled, saw Spitelout clapping his hands over his ears, Gobber grabbing an axe hand extension fallen in the waters of the deck. Gobber was screaming something at him, pointing, but he couldn't hear him, his ears ringing. He shouted suddenly, an order, looked out at the sea again, the waters madness. And his dragon- _What on earth-__

"Thornado, you come back here-"

But his voice stopped within him, his hands thrusting himself above the ship's rim, his eyes fixed upon the ocean's surface just ahead of the bows of the armada. Across the entire sea surface, a massive churning transformed the calm sea into a swirling, immense vortex of water of a diameter fifty ships wide and one hundred ships long. The swells of waves taller than masts swirled within the watery vortex, miniature eddies within vaster walls of living horror indescribable. And in the middle of the vast vortex, the entire ocean was rising, rising, rising above them all, a thunderous towering heap of water glistening full of wrath. And alive. A living, breathing tower of water, a great mammoth sun of an eye burning through the sheets of water falling away from it, falling away from a vaster snout, vaster jaws, a vaster head rising from the sea, consuming the sea until all that was left before them was that burning head and burning eye. The Great Dragon.

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It was dark, lonely-

He knew they were there, the other dragons. Why couldn't he sense them? Open your eyes, _feel it._

Ormarr looked out in the green, black ocean. It had been a while, how long he felt unsure - an insecurity borne of the damage done by the Skrill, by Skari. The lightning inside of him, it had done horrible things, he could feel it, even if he couldn't tell what exactly was wrong, he sensed that he was not the same, that his mind was lighter

now, if that could be used as a word for this feeling, this . . .

A shadow moved to his right, a host of black shadows, and he blinked his great eyes, saw the light from them wash over the school of dragons that was passing him by. His dragons and friends, they were humming things to him, in tones concerned and thick, yapping as they neared and the dark shape flapped towards him. He felt something dark and sharp push through him, like a force he could not control, and .

. .

What did the lightning do?

The Skrill fire did things like that, he knew it from before. It was mental like that, it did different things to different victims. It was more than merely physical, it was, it could be-

He lashed out suddenly, thoughts spilling out in his brain, unable to piece them together suddenly, leaving him in a fear of the worst, a fear that he might never be quite the same again, that- He roared suddenly, boomed out into the ocean, into the blue darkness and the throbbing school of twittering dragons swimming all around. _Get away from me_, he hissed, a sudden madness filling him, a dire need to get angry and destroy, to let out this pent-up confusion. He lashed his tail, the ocean heaved, swirls of water curled around him, and he could feel a great mass roll to his motion.

Chirps of _no_ and _Ormarr_ hit his ears and suddenly he couldn't stand it anymore. They needed to understand what this was about, that Skari had gotten him more than any of them, that he was one of those unlucky ones to feel the mental horror of the Skrill's weapon, that maybe if he was someone else, things might be different, but right now they needed to keep away, because it wasn't in his control anymore, _sanity_ was not in his control anymore.

He lashed his tail again, the great mass of his body sending the schools fleeing, pushing them away, he could tell, violently maybe, but he didn't care, couldn't care at the moment. He needed to get away, get away from this place and everything familiar, from Skari most of all. The idea of his presence so near filled him with something morphing from fear to disgust, awful ugly disgust and disdain. Ormarr flapped his mighty body forward, not quite thinking of directions, just away from the plaintive sounds of his fellow dragons. He moved, pushed, swept down, down into the depths of the blackness, trying to work off those feelings obsessing in his brain. Minutes passed, some undetermined amount of time, and he felt a ripple of anger cringe him and he rose, swept up suddenly, the trail of his body creating a wake that he could hear in the water around him.

There was something up there, spots in the top of the water, human things, something foreign and- a feeling sparked in him and for a brief moment he knew it was the madness in his nerves doing something to him, before he felt an honest urge to lash out at the specks of boats in the ocean above him.

Where was he anyway?

Somewhere in the back of his mind he knew it was somewhere familiar, could almost sense that he met some of these ships before.

But it didn't matter now.

He lashed up, pushed his body up towards the ships and roared a great heavy, angry roar. It was enough to shake the ocean and he knew it, hissed a grin as he watched the boats roll in the wake of his anger. He lashed upward, felt the water fall away as he burst out of the top, the wind in his eyes suddenly, wrapping around his eyes, licking in between the folds of skin and cooling the water soaking over his body. The ocean was white and black, the wind strong and fierce and his own lashing devastating and beautiful. He roared again, saw the armada shrink at his own voice, the minuscule figures on them yelling and cowering. Sails shivered and hulls bent back. This was some great army, coming forward. He'd been around enough to know what war looked like, and what was this people trying to fight now?

He roared again, lashed his tail, watched as he overturned a segment of ships, the boards cracking and breaking, people shouting and the sound of fear shrill and sharp in the sky.

Dagr.

The word sprang in his mind for a moment, made him stop, the water lapping. The people yelled, their voices clear in his mind's stillness for the briefest time.

Then the word faded and the hot confusion overcame him again. He heard himself shouting, his voice vibrating inside his throat, the pain in his head getting stronger, that digging angry force in his mind. The ships didn't have a chance, if he could help it. . . .

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"_This was a stupid idea_."

"Oh you're afraid, Snotlout?"

"No I'm not-"

Fishlegs frowned. That little banter had taken place at least, uh, eleven maybe twelve times in the trip. Maybe thirteen. Thirteen sounded about right. Didn't Snotlout figure out he was looking like a dummy? It's true, though, even he thought the escapade was looking pretty dumb right now, walking for hours and hours and still not coming upon the town. Astrid and Hiccup were so going to be worried about them but no, no one would listen to him, and he sure wasn't going to high tail it back through the woods alone - not with strange dragon creatures around to bite your head off. He was no Hiccup and he was not going to chance an encounter with some dragon he hadn't studied up on.

Fishlegs looked up and squinted at the afternoon sun.

So there. That was _his_ rant. He'd told Ruff and Tuff and Snotlout, but they wouldn't believe him. Well, Snotlout _might_ have believed him, but he wasn't going to let anyone know.

And it was _his_ _own_ fault for letting them bring him along.

"Let Astrid and Hiccup have their talk," Ruff said.

"We can do this just fine and get all the credit," said Snotlout.

"Hiccup deserves that we do something instead of sitting around," Tuff said.

All nice and fine. Until you can't find the town Astrid said was somewhere here.

Fishlegs whistled, bumped his feet forward, stepped on a crawling fern on the dirty brown earth under them. Poor thing. These plants looked a little different from the ones on Berk. But whenever he stopped to investigate one of them, they'd drag him forward again and say they had things to do.

He was not looking forward to those "things" whatever they were. He just wanted to get Toothless out all safe and easy, like. Wasn't there some other way besides brute violence? He had no idea what Ruff and Tuff had in mind, less of what Snotlout would do to make a mess of it.

He looked over to his right, the slant of the sun creating unsightly splotches on the kids' faces, tired frustrated faces. Behind them, the green of endless pines and spikes of leaves and brambles. Scratched bark and thin films of moss - a landscape he'd been seeing for hours now, though he did notice the gentle sloping of the earth as they progressed, the way it was getting lower now, a slight incline, with a subtle change in the fauna, maybe a touch of flowers now and lighter leaves, and-

"Fishlegs!"

He popped his head up quickly, realized it was Tuffnut whispering something hot and low. Fishlegs ducked instinctively. "Not a dragon, I don't need to be chased by one of those right now."

"It's not a dragon, stupid, look!" Ruffnut jabbed her hand ahead of her, her finger pointing deftly towards the valley below them, the grass waving gently over the slope, hints of green and sunlight-tinted, the space framed by a grove of the tangled trees they'd been walking through for eons. Fishlegs gaped a bit, blinked at the sunlight that was coming through clear and fresh now, and the rush of a wind that was beginning to pound his face as the forest fell away into the grassy meadows below.

There were people there, small figures he could barely make out in the foliage and undergrowth and peat and moss. Or maybe because they were wearing dark stuff and it blended in too well. Fishlegs squinted, figured he'd go with the latter. But . . . "Who are they?"

Tuffnut rolled his eyes at him. "The enemy."

"Oh no, does that mean you're gonna do something?" Fishlegs felt his pulse quicken. He wasn't exactly in the best mood to see fistfights and without Meatlug, he was feeling pretty defenseless. "What's going to happen?!"

"Cool it, Fishlegs," Tuff lolled, waving him off and grabbing a thin tree branch suddenly, snapping it off and shielding his face with it.

"Grab something, you guys, we're moving in." He stalked forward, Snotlout suddenly at his side, the latter teens' movements oddly choppy.

"Oh no. . ." Fishlegs whimpered. This was not a good idea. But when was it? Stuff like this never ended very good. He snapped a shrub and shook it in front of his face. "Meatlug . . ." he whispered, to himself, and he clapped his palm over his mouth in case the other kids caught him. He'd never see the end of it if they did, and that was another thing he didn't want to face. He was stupid, stupid to join these kooks on this so-called mission. But they were trying to save Toothless, so things couldn't be all bad. Like, what if it was Meatlug caught there? Fishlegs frowned, blinked down from the vista and eyed the shrubbery at his feet. Yeah, it was better to take a chance like this. If only it hadn't taken them forever to get here. But they didn't want to turn back, even as hours passed. They were stubborn, like any good Viking, stubborn and dumb. Fishlegs was of the opinion that waiting and being prepared was better, but majority won and so here was he, hiding behind shrubbery and hoping the strangers out there would be nice to them, or not see them, either of those choices would be good.

"Sssshhhh," Tuff said suddenly, creeping forward.

"I ain't saying nothing. . ." Fishlegs whispered, cowering down behind his bush.

Ruffnut slipped out after him, the two of them quickly moving over down the slope, their shapes getting lost in the grasses that Fishlegs suddenly realized were quite tall. He fought off the urge to measure the stalks, and compose some kind of naturalistic observation. But the leaves definitely were-

"Get down, Fishlegs, I'm coming through-" Snotlout pushed by him suddenly and Fishlegs yelped. "Whoa!" He stumbled back, grappled the earth underneath him in an attempt to catch his balance. Snotlout snickered and flashed his camouflage sneakily at him as he passed. Fishlegs frowned. That wasn't nice at all. Of course . . . he peeked over the ledge, the expanse of grass that Snotlout disappeared to and the random figures that were converging at some, what was it? A stream. It looked like, or some springs - springs! They didn't have too many of those on Berk, and this one looked really bubbly. And the people were scooping up the water and filling up leather satchels with it and their little horses were off to the side, almost hidden in the crabby bushes and the pines and low branches and stuff, and then there was a movement there that looked familiar and suddenly he realized it was Ruffnut and Tuffnut, sneaking around the back of the horses and wagons and stuff and they were not going to be doing something smart, were they?

He hid behind his branch, realized what they were thinking and he didn't like it. There were huge square, wooden baskets hanging on either side of the pack animals, baskets filled with peat and grass and stuff to hide in. He would barely have even noticed the clandestine move if Snotlout hadn't tried fighting for a spot in one of the baskets. "They're gonna see you," Fishlegs whispered and closed his eyes. He couldn't watch.

He peeked out, put the branch aside for a moment. All was quiet down there, the 'enemy' all mulling over the stream and the horses

neighing softly, grazing in the grasses. He swallowed tightly. So that's how they thought they could get into town? _Well, not me._
I'm going to find Hiccup and Astrid.

Cuz maybe it would be a good idea if someone did something smart for a change.

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Skari stirred, uncurled his head from underneath his wing and peeked towards the entrance of the cave, the strands of orange light glinting sharp off the rock walls and splintering through the comforting darkness. He buried his head back under his wingtip, clacked his jaws irritably, snuck his eyes back out and squinted at the fragments of light playing off the curve in the stone. He hated daylight, even the last faint remnants of the setting sun, but maybe just this once he'd brave it. The hunt must have started by now. At least, he hoped it had. A hot clawing played up his chest, his cold breaths heaving out fast into the dark space ahead of him. To think the very hunts he hated all these winters could be the thrill pulsing through him now, the means of retribution long overdue. His ancestors had suffered long and hard to fight the invaders, to eradicate every one of them off the islands, and now that dream was nearly to fruition. Only a remnant remained, a meager remnant of the Night Furies. Dagr's death would be a blow unrecoverable, a tipping point to certain extinction. And for all the Skrills who'd gone before, he'd be the one to strike it for them. It'll have to be breathtaking.

A quiver trembled through his body, down the spines of his back. He shook his head, the strange agitation still tickling him. An anxious anticipation. There wasn't any doubt about the outcome, but so much was riding on this. He shifted his body, snuck out his wing ever so slowly from underneath two small bodies resting besides him, their wings enfolded around themselves and their little neck spikes still soft and pliable, pleasant little points jutting into his chest and belly. They stirred as his wing slipped out from underneath them; one little snout yawned and opened yellow eyes at him, clacking her jaws as he lifted himself above the cave floor.

Can we go with you?

Ing, go back to sleep. Skari nosed the faint sparkling purple of Ing's small forehead, nudged her head towards her chest, but she refused to curl up again. He could feel the shivers vibrating through her body near his, the tickling adrenaline that was also quivering through himself. She could feel it too. They all had been feeling it, ever since he came home with the news of his encounter with Dagr. They knew this day would come, he knew it would come. There was nothing to be afraid of. He pushed his snout over her back, licked her little spines, felt the shivering subside. But the other body was jerking now, wiggling against his sister as he whipped his head up and dug his small pointed nose into Skari's neck.

I can fight too. The small head sniffed at him.

Skari nudged the top of the snout of that slim head, a perfect miniature of his own and brimming with the same rashness and eager anticipation. Too rash, too young. He clacked his jaws at the little one. _Not against Dagr. I'll deal with him myself._

But he can't even fly.

Makes him all the more desperate - and dangerous. Your scales are still too tender to withstand his fire.

But father-

Fenris. Skari throated sharply, halted the fledgling's clacking, but the little eyes stared back at him, glassed over in obstinacy, the little ruff of neck spikes hackling. He had to quell that. _You're not getting mixed up in any hunt, least of all one involving Dagr. He's weak right now, but he'll still rip you limb from limb. You think killing a Night Fury is so easy?_

I can do it.

No.

His chilling breath formed speckles of ice over the bodies of his offspring. The small body near him slumped down, the head thudding down on the rough cave floor and rocking from side to side, a swoosh of motion amidst the black shadows of the overhanging rocks. Skari lifted his left wing over the two besides him, sifted that wing's edge through his teeth, the sharp preening quickening his mind. He stretched his wingspan, the wingtips brushing against the cave walls, his tail whipping around the young pair huddling near his body. He clacked his jaws at the defiant one.

We're not dealing with a stupid Gronckle or a hotheaded Nightmare. A Night Fury is smart, reclusive, and ruthless; you must be more so. You can't just fight his strength; you must find his weakness.

He cocked his head at the glassy eyes and the faintly spotted, gray body. The pointed head sulked at him, the nimble tail thrashing against his own and its pliable spikes bending into Skari's scales, the slim sheaths still not developed into the razor spikes of his own neck and back. Which only made his point. _You will learn, but not today. Watch your sister for me,_ Skari hummed pointedly.

He stretched the limbs of his wings down, dug the great lone claws of his wings into the cracks in the stone, moved towards the scattered, fading light of the entrance. A cool brisk wind sifted in from the gaping hole that opened up to a sheer cliff face screaming down to crashing waves far, far below. He perched on his hind legs over the entrance, tipped forward in a free fall, shot out his wings and pumped across the shimmering blue vastness of the sea to his right and the lush craggy green of the vertical land to his left. The light was bearable now, the sun's direct glare vanishing under the sea, replaced by violet sweeping over the delicate wisps of cloud thickening along the skyline, streaming in violet tendrils across the shimmering dome above him. The same violet glow every evening, just after sunset. Too much like the fire of a Night Fury. He glanced away from the violet horizon, turned instead to the vast deep blue on the opposite side, the sign he'd been waiting for. Soon darkness would envelop the land and sea, that lovely darkness without moon or stars. Those blackest of nights when the Night Fury invaded, struck without warning and without mercy. The battles in mid-air, the relentless screaming and fire-charged swirling air, the tumbling to death in the sea. They kept attacking, forced his father to muster up every spark

of lightning energy to paralyze the wretched dragons. Over hundreds of passing seasons, they grew more resistant to the lightning fire, got tougher to kill, and even the poison of their violet fire invaded into the lightning Spiral itself, twisting in a vortex of hot and cold, numbing lightning and searing fire. The Spiral was supposed to be a Skrill's ultimate defense, but it had become a deathtrap. The lightning surged to frightening energies to counter the fire, surged to levels even unbearable for a Skrill. One night, it went beyond unbearable. Only one came out alive, only Dagr.

He mustn't let that happen again.

He flapped his wings sharper against the brisk gale, clicked his tongue against his teeth, scanned the dark clefts indented in the vertical faces of the cliffs, the clefts he knew so well and was sure Dagr would hide in. Yet, it wouldn't be easy finding the Night Fury, even a flightless one. An unease played inside him, his eyes surveying the waves smacking into the cliff bases far below. It would have been much simpler to have killed him on the ship when he found him bound and captured. Just pounce on his back, break his neck, flee before the humans awoke. Simpler, but too easy. Dagr couldn't get away with a death as instantaneous as that. No, he'd have to think of a more fitting fate, a demise just as tormenting as his father's had been. No, worse than that - something only a traitor would deserve.

He bristled at the sparks fizzing around his spikes, streaking down his neck and across the leading edge of his wings in small tendrils. The wind wavered uncertainly over him, angled him nearer the cliffs. Just how he'd do it, he wasn't sure yet. The hunt was the perfect setting, but the details still escaped him, which was a bit disturbing. He'd examined several plans, felt flexible about them, but eventually he'd have to settle on something final.

Suddenly he sensed a sharp black shape ahead and far below, a long smooth silhouette against the forested headland lying halfway on the graveled beach, its length bobbing in the breaking waves and its multitude of great white sheets filling with brisk air. A ship - the same one out at sea, in the midst of the water dragons. He had been so consumed with Ormarr at his tail, blasting the vile beast and his minions, the ship hadn't caught his attention much, just another human crew caught in the storm. But now-

His spines bristled instinctively, the many masts foreign and ominous, the hull strangely glinting like volcanic rock and sleekly jet-black like a Night Fury's skin. No hull glinted like that. He hovered above the masts, wavered against the stiff wind, cocking his head towards the lone ship bobbing in the inlet waters, only its sails rippling a reply. No sign of humans. He angled himself, lowered gently, and clasped the main beam, digging his wing claws into the wood. A wicked scent startled him; he lowered his snout down against the beam, ran his nose along its axis. A Night Fury's scent. _Dagr_.

He purred long and low. Interesting. Fairly old, but very thick along the entire length of the beam. He pitched forward precariously, wrapped his tail around the beam to steady himself. His lowered snout sensed another smell, a human smell, faintly familiar, wafting stronger from below, emanating from the deck. He bunched his legs, leapt down, the deck heaving with his energy, the scent stronger now

on the floor as he touched his nose along the wooden boards.

The rider. That's who it was. His mind sparked, the little image of a boy, just a portion of his face, behind the hissing jaws of Dagr in the storm several days ago. He hadn't expected Dagr to be ridden, to find any dragon ridden by that two-legged vermin. And now this. He tossed his head, snorted, his guts churning inside him hotly and his breath casting chilled dew on the wood below. He eyed the lustrous black walls of the ship all around, a strange lustrousness foreign to wood. He flicked his tongue at the ship's side, gaped his jaws slightly and shot blue sparks shimmering across the rim. The sparks took to the lustrous walls, streaked through and zig-zagged, came back again. Playful little lights. He shot another volley, stronger this time, the sparks crackling audibly and leaping off the walls, sparking into the wooden floor, spraying his snout with his own little lightning. He hummed, the feeling electrifying, exhilarating, breathtaking.

A sudden swooshing sound jolted his head up, from the right towards the jutting cliff head walling one side of the inlet. Human voices, many voices. His muscles tensed and he launched into the air, his left wing smacking into the great sheet above him, the spines of his neck tearing into the fabric as he winged madly off the deck. He flew into the rifts in the high cliffs a few wingspans ahead of him, clawing a grip on the rocks. He tucked himself into one slender crevice, twisted around in the cramped space to glimpse out the narrow opening.

The force of his takeoff had dislodged the ship from its beached position, jerking it backwards into the breaking waves. The sparks still snapped and sputtered conspicuously along the ship's hull, the blue tendrils snaking along its length and fading within the lustrous blackness. The ship was gaining speed, the rip current sucking it past the cliff's head. The voices beyond the cliff grew louder, and suddenly a great shadow of a ship turned the corner around the headland. He recognized the broken, barnacled hull and tattered sails. A crisp brown singe edged along the sail's top, traces of the last dragon raid of the town. Nets streamed down the sides, some brimming with succulent fish flapping helplessly within the wet prisons. He sliced the edge of his tongue along his jaw, wetted his teeth. When was the last time he nabbed a few off their nets? A lovely breakfast that would be. He clawed along the edge of the opening, ventured his head slightly out of the cleft in the rock, his eyes on the bursting trawl, but the excited sounds of the humans distracted him. No, not excited, alarming. The round faces were staring towards the smaller ship, the black-hulled one now drifting towards them and threatening to intersect the great ship's path. The massive hull turned and brushed up against the side of the unmanned vessel, humans in sudden motion and scampering over the edge and landing on the deck. Their thin upright bodies bent down over the deck, fondling various objects, searching over every part of it, like it was a foreigner, an invader.

The image of Dagr's rider came back to him and he felt his nerves hum inside of him. Something played up his mind, something that seemed horribly outlandish, but perhaps it would work?

How much did Dagr feel for the boy anyway? So much as to leave the dragon world, as to become a traitor to everything he was? To abandon anything that seemed like a family. . . .?

Maybe the boy actually meant something to him, the way Skari's own family meant so much to him.

He hummed, gazed more intently at the black-hulled ship, now accosted by the humans, their movements fretting, their voices agitated and talking fast gibberish as the ship began to move in line with the great ship's course, the shadowed hulls melding in the twilight of the coming night. Maybe it would work. The boy was on the island somewhere, and if he could just find him . . .

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She was getting frustrated now, he could tell.

Of course hours of walking would do that.

He looked at her, her face hard and serious, firmly watching the scene before them. It was tired, he had to admit, but when the kids disappeared . . . they had to go find them again. He and Astrid had been talking, just talking for a while, until he got that funny feeling inside of him and he had the notion that the rest of them were not doing something quite so sensible. Only after a couple minutes was he actually convinced that they'd gone out to find the town themselves. And with the impatience they had to do something, doubled with the lack of progress most of that morning, no wonder they went off to try something. Astrid was not amused by that, and for a good hour or so sarcastic mimicking was all he heard out of her.

But now all that had faded and she was silent. Silent and mad. He hated to ask why, it's not like they could stop the kids from doing something stupid, and weren't they going to have to find the town anyway? Trailing the kids was a chore, but . . .

It kept his mind busy, busy from thinking about Toothless, unable to do something about it.

Torture of the heart was exhausting, and it would do him no good to be tired when he finally got Toothless out of there. He sighed suddenly, squinted in the dimming light. They'd been walking for hours - all day in fact - through the dense forest and the intermittent meadows. At first, the broken twigs and flattened grass patches gave a pretty good idea of their trajectory, but after several stretches of barren rock fields, smoking, still-hot volcanic debris that took hours to climb through, they just about lost all trace of them.

The heavy branches were a tangled maze above him and the thick canopy of leaves dappling light and shadow across the little clearing. Streaks of light swathed over his hands, played up his tunic, struck across his face and made him squint in the orange glare. The light was orange now, and that wasn't good.

The forest had been so thick at times that he wasn't always sure what time of day it was. Breakfast and lunch passed ages ago, judging by the several rounds of hunger that grabbed him in their clutches and then subsided, only to bite back sharper than before. His shoulder, his stomach, his throat, his legs and feet - everything hurt, ached, hungered, and thirsted. The meager amount of berries they had

picked off shrubs were hardly sufficient for this kind of travel, and he was worried that maybe Astrid might be running off of adrenaline now. She hadn't said she was hungry, and while he knew she wouldn't stand to be the first person to complain about something, he knew she had to be running low about now. He'd only brought a few items of sustenance with him from home, and they'd agreed to save those for emergencies. After all, he had planned on resources for only one person, not five.

He looked up again, crunched on the dry leaves under him. He looked down, saw his boots laced with beads of dew, the grass sumptuously wet underneath the shade of the leafy canopy, the slender shafts of light growing fainter and fainter with each moment of time. The sky's orange light was unmistakable. Evening was approaching, and with it, the night. Astrid's silhouette walked on ahead of him suddenly, that same murky pace in her step. "Astrid?" he asked, the first word between them for at least an hour.

She kept walking. "Yeah, what?"

"You're okay, right?"

"Sure."

Hiccup smirked, felt that she was lying, and kicked the leaves. There was a moss-cocooned log in his path; he mindlessly clinked his metal foot against the shadowed underside, bits of molding bark chinking off and tiny specks of insects lifting into the air like dust. The hypnotic haze of living dust floated in a standstill there, glowing bright against the black backdrop of the log's shadow. He looked up at where her shape was punching through the forest, determination and irritation in her movement. He stepped forward, his strides long. He hated to see her like this, hated to think that something was festering inside of her. They used to be able to talk about things - sure, it seemed that mostly he was the one with the problems to gab about, he was always the one that needed a pat on the back or comfort. She seemed pretty much perfect with things, and she always had it together. He was proud of her for that, but . . . right now, it didn't seem that way. None of them were being their normal selves. The past few days were insane, and they hurt to live through - he'd done a few maybe rash things? And she . . . she never wanted to get involved like this. She just wanted to keep him safe, and now here she was, still trying to make good of that goal while they traipsed over enemy country to a place they'd never seen to spring a dragon from a trap that might not even be there, if they'd gotten to the hunt first. . . .

Hiccup, you better stop thinking about it.

He swallowed, stepped up alongside her. She turned her head slightly and glared at him. He stepped back, surprised. "Why the look?" He caught up with her. She didn't answer, pressed forward again.

He pursed his lips, slapped his arms down, wincing as the movement made his shoulder complain. Why didn't she open up to him? Holding it in was not the way to do things, he'd learned that lesson long ago. He closed his eyes a moment, tried to let ease what he realized was frustration.

There was a rushing sound suddenly, and he pressed his lids closer

shut. It wasn't his imagination. Water. He opened his eyes suddenly, blinked and scanned the forest around them. There was a stream somewhere here. The dryness in his throat scratched at him and he licked his lips. He looked to his right, saw her still trudging on, her form unchanged among the mesmerizing, endless lines of trees rising all around her, the streaks of light between the leaves dappling her in orange light, her hair turned a fiery sandy-gold.

"Astrid, did you hear that?"

She turned, and he sensed a dull sadness in her, as she glanced up at him, a weary tiredness. She didn't answer.

"It's water, Astrid-"

She nudged her head up, looked at him from under her bangs. He exhaled, felt the dryness in his throat. "Come on, we can get a drink, we really need one, and then we can get back to searching for the kids-"

"That's not what I'm worried about, okay, Hiccup?" She had a snap in her voice suddenly and she looked at him sharply, her one revealed eye hard and narrow.

He was getting tired of this mystery. Why wouldn't she come out with what was bugging her? "Then what is?" he snapped back, and the tension in his face suddenly loosed when he realized he was shouting. "I- I'm sorry, Astrid." He blinked at her. "I didn't mean to shout."

She shrugged. "It had to come out sometime." She turned her back to him, started in the direction of the stream.

He swallowed, stepped towards her. "What is bothering you?"

She stopped and he held back, nervous suddenly. The hum of bugs somewhere murmured along with the stream, chirps of birds - too happy for this situation, but their brightness giving him some kind of hope in all this. The light shifted gently, as a wind breathed through. "Astrid?" he said, his voice level.

"Let's get to the stream, okay?" she said, not looking back at him. She moved forward, threw herself over a fallen log, old and rotting, and pushed her hair over behind her ears. He paused before stepping forward to follow her. So this was something more serious then? One of those things that you had to, like, sit down for to take?

Maybe it was, the way she was acting now. He jumped over the log, held his left arm to keep the injury from moving around too much. He winced suddenly, shook his head and looked forward. The trees were giving way into a clearing now, the branches thinning, the ferns falling away to the bumpy shoreline. The rush of water was clear now, as he looked over the length of the dark waters running free and happy, long and clear. A smile suddenly played on his lips, something like relief perhaps, the thought of something to quench the dryness inside of him. She was standing there, behind the ferns and bushes, just inside the curtain of forest before the open space next to the river. He ran forward, felt his prosthetic smart over the rocks and pebbles on the shore. The water was so close, and he slid down on his

knees suddenly, sliding over the gray rocks, running his hand into the stream, scooping up the clear, refreshing water. The water poured down over his chin, flowed cool and fresh in his throat, lapped down his neck and made his tunic wet and cold. He hadn't known how desperately thirsty he actually was.

He whirled around, saw Astrid there a few feet from him, that somberness heavy in her features and pose, her shoulders slumped, her eyes lifeless. He bit his lip. In their two years together, he always found ways to lighten her up, ways to make her smile when she was serious. The water played around his knees, made him chilled. He cupped his hands and swept them up from the water, threw them towards her, laughing suddenly.

She smarted suddenly, stepped back, gasped.

"Astrid!" He smiled.

She got a fire in her eyes, splashed down into the water and shoveled a handful of stream his way. He laughed, shrieked as the water soaked into him, made his hair stick to his face. It was deathly cold, but he didn't care. He'd made her smile.

"Don't play with me," she hummed, a playfulness finally kicking into her voice. She splashed towards him, kneeling in the water, and flicked her fingers at his face, the tiny splats dainty and small on his cheeks. He squinted, smiled, reached up and grabbed her hand, looked into her lovely blue eyes, eyes at last sparkling and full of life. She stopped flicking her fingertips suddenly, looked at him and paused. He swallowed, felt like he needed to say something here. . .
.

Her face pulled into something uncertain and darkness clouded her eyes. She slid her wrist out of his grip and pushed her hand into the sand, rose up out of the water. He shifted his legs and pushed them into the gravel underneath him, let the water slide off of him as he got to his feet.

"You want to tell me something?" he ventured, quietly.

She crossed her arms a moment, sighed, and let her hands loose again. She pushed her bangs away, and they fell back over her eyes. "Hiccup, I've been thinking about this, a lot."

He searched in her eyes, and she looked away, cleared her throat. "I have to be honest with you."

He swallowed.

"And I think you're wrong." She sniffed, inhaled suddenly, talked fast. "You were wrong to come out here and take a chance by yourself. You were wrong to skip on your responsibilities to your tribe. You were . . ." Her voice was cracking now, a gentle, sharp cracking. "-_wrong_ to make us come out here, instead of helping with the war that's been started. We could have done so much, _you_ could have done so much. I'm sure they need you there, for those dragons. There's so many dragons who need you, and you're the only one of all of us who knows how to deal with them." She wiped her bang from her forehead, looked at him. He stared back, somehow not surprised with the words she had to say. It's just that no one had quite spoken them

before. His heart was numb, oddly numb, and he merely nodded at her. "Yeah, I know. . ." he hummed. Something convicted stung in his heart and he swallowed. "But I can't let Toothless get killed." He peeked at her, knew that whether or not she understood, that was the truth and he would not regret it.

She wiped her bangs away, the water dripping from her fingers. "You realize that Induction Day still happened, in theory . . ."

He squinted. Tradition was strange like that, but would that day actually count?

". . . and I'm not sure your father is ready for you to join his council, or-" She caught her breath. "-if I am . . ."

He looked up at her, found a strange maturity in her blue eyes.. "Astrid, this is a special case. Stuff like this doesn't happen everyday-"

"You mean war?" She locked eyes with him. "Yeah, that's what Induction Day was all about, to see how you'd fare in war. And I think you failed with flying colors."

He blinked, stepped back, the slosh of water around his feet sharp suddenly and intruding, angry even like her. He opened his mouth to say something, realized he didn't know quite what to say.

"You don't know responsibility, Hiccup." She looked away, turned back out of the water, the liquid's sound cold and sharp and lonely, pricking off her boots in glimmers of white and nothingness, rippling down past her, waves fading flat, flat and empty into nothing as it rippled towards his feet and just didn't quite reach him.

She turned back to him, motioned for him to come forward. "We got things to do," she said, lifelessly.

He turned his eyes down, stepped forward in the water, into the fading ripples from her waves, muddling up the mess of circles in the water, the splashes confused and lost in the surface of the waves, drifting on into the center of the river, melding into the current, out towards the town where they were headed, the ripples fading and soon gone.

He turned to her, stepped out of the water. She eyed him, a heavy sadness in her eyes. He looked closer, tried to find the beauty in those blue eyes again, tried to find the joy in them, the endless confidence, the way she used to lie and say he was doing all right, that he was going to make a great council member, a great man.

But it was gone

20. Special Announcement

****Author's Note****

If you're one of those loyal readers of the illustrated webnovel How to Train Your Dragon II: The Dragon Whisperer, then this announcement is for you:

I'd like to say sorry, first, for being a bit uneven with the updates. They're slowly spreading out to Tuesday and Wednesday. I think writer's block is hitting me (the one half of the writing team), and even under normal circumstances, the novel is gobbling up time I could have used for a number of things: looking at people's art on my deviantArt, getting on commissions, learning about animation, chilling with my sister. So to help alleviate some things, my sister and I decided on a new schedule.

****Instead of every week, we're going to post every week and a half: something like Wednesdays and the next Saturday.****

So I don't know if I can get a post on Wednesday this week, I have to see.

If you still love our story or want to continue reading or even dream of forgiving me for being so ridiculous with my muse, then you deserve a major glomp.

21. Chapter 18: War in the Air

a/n: I really apologize for the wanky schedule going on right now. We're sooo late with this one. Writer's block is having a field day with me, but my sister helped heaps and hopefully we can do better in the future. Enjoy this one! She did the lovely illustration, too.

3

View the illustration at the official webpage. Put a period where the dashes are: [howtotrainyourdragon2 - thecomicseries - com](http://howtotrainyourdragon2-thecomicseries-com)
>or at my deviantArt gallery: [inhonoredglory - deviantart - gallery - 38855965](http://inhonoredglory-deviantart-gallery-38855965)<p>

* * *

><p>How to Train Your Dragon II
>The Dragon Whisperer

****Act II**
>A World Shattered

****Chapter 18**
>War in the Air

What was this - _grass?_ Peat and ugh, man this was awful. Honestly, Ruffnut's slobber was better than this.

Tuffnut grimaced, contained any gagging as the horse jolted him to the side. It was a bumpy ride, and it was fun at times, but to be honest, really, getting hauled around in a wooden basket, lying on your back and staring out of thin slits of wood and breathing in bits of grass and mucky mist was not his idea of a good time. His idea required a bit more freedom on his part - minus the wooden basket and everything would be cool.

But it'd been this boring for a couple hours now, and even under a bunch of peat, he could tell that the day was winding down now and night was in the air.

He shifted awkwardly in the basket, blew out a sigh. He swore he

heard Ruff somewhere on the other side, making some random noise, the kind she usually did when she wanted to get his attention.

He wished there wasn't this horse between him and her. He was looking forward to a nice slap in the face. He could use the shock in his nerves, this constriction was really getting old.

She'd have to make up for that later . . .

Voices suddenly. He blinked, tried to push his face into the mush of vegetation. The slaves were talking. They talked so awfully low, like it was always some secret they were talking about. Which worked fine anyway - it made listening much more interesting, instead of simple eavesdropping. At least it gave him something to do.

Tuffnut squinted his eyes and listened.

"Rune!"

"! again?"

"Yes."

Won't you people speak in complete sentences? One-word conversations were not going to provide him with anything. Tuffnut bent upward, trying not to upset the dumb grass. The conversations before were boring to the extreme, but this time - even though he only caught a few bits of nothing, the tone sounded fascinating, and he knew there was something in it. Come on, speak up, he hummed in his head.

"I hate it when that happens . . ."

"You realize every time we go out, we could have revolted." This new voice was slick and sharp.

"And risk all those deaths - again?" came a far away voice, thinner and fainter.

"I'm tired of waiting," the sharp voice came again, and Tuff could read a hint of something foreign in it.

"But Hervi-"

"Is it always about Hervi?"

"He's our chief, he still is . . ."

"You really believe that?" The sharp voice was hot.

"Listen, Vott, so long as Hervi is alive, my loyalty is not changing."

There was a sudden break in the conversation. Tuffnut blinked, scuffed out a bit of yucky moldy grass from his face. It was just getting interesting, too. But now a new sound was coming in. He knew it the moment he heard it. He'd heard it a thousand times before in his eighteen years.

Dragon raid.

The sound was unmistakable, loud and ugly, scary even - even for him. Tuffnut bit his lip. The scream of warriors, of weapons being prepared. He was literally itching to get out and throw a couple catapults at the wild reptiles, but he punched the peat above him instead, muttering something indistinguishable into the mucky grass. The ruckus was getting closer, louder, and his hands just wanted to get out there and do something.

Curse this stupid grass.

He leaned backwards a little, bent his neck, tried to peek out through the holes in the box he was in. The landscape was changing now, getting sparser and dull. All the lush vegetation was ebbing. They were going up, it was some kind of hillside they were on, with rocks, a lot of rocks underneath them. He could feel the clap of the horses' hoofs on them, the irritated hum of the slave riding the pack animal.

Someone gasped suddenly. "This is bigger-" he gasped and suddenly stopped.

Tuffnut huffed. Bigger than _what_?

"Double time!" someone shouted suddenly and the horse lurched forward. Tuff held back a yelp at the sudden motion, cursed the stupid change of motion.

"And Rune is ill now, of all the-"

"Can we get the spring water to him on time?" It was a strange harried voice, a foreign woman's voice, with a formality that was - odd.

"On time before what?" The shrill sharp one.

The woman came back. "I'm afraid. Can't you see those flames? This is - so much bigger. Someone needs to be in charge-"

"You don't need a ruler to fight dragons," came another shrill foreign voice. "Besides we have Heather-"

"Oh _Heather_," came that sharp dissenting voice again. Tuffnut got the vibes that this dude was like a bad apple in the group. "She's not the _most_ capable when her father is having one of those _episodes_."

"Vott, this isn't a time for gossip." This sounded like an older man, someone everybody no doubt thought was wise or something. "Even if I do hate her, I don't like the sound of your voice. Now let's all get moving! Dragons are attacking our homes, or what small part of them that we call ours. Let's man the catapults!"

"You'll see, you might want to side with Hervi, but while you're languishing in negotiations, I'll be spilling Skirra Vellite blood without you."

"_Vott_."

"Get moving, I know . . ."

And with that the horse chugged forward again, a sudden lurch. Tuffnut held back a belch that would have been messy were it not for the fact that he hadn't eaten for a good four hours.

He had to sit and think about this strange conversation. Sounded like some slave revolt was in the air.

It was going to be exciting. Or at least it better be.

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Panting, too much panting . . .

Maybe this was what drowning felt like? It could be what drowning felt like. He was wet enough with sweat for that, and boy was he out of breath right now. Maybe he needed to calm down. That's right, Fishlegs, Mama always said to soothe yourself and sing songs when you are nervous.

And boy! Was he nervous.

Panicking was a better word._ Hiccup, Astrid, where are you? _Fishlegs stepped over yet another fallen branch in the middle of his path. There were too many of those things, out to interrupt his broken running to the first sign of his friends. Stupid twins and stupid Snotlout. He tried to hum something. "Hush, baby, don't you cry, wait for nighty-night to fly . . . dreams-" He caught his breath again. Singing was not going to happen when he was this out of breath. He tried whistling, squinted in the slanting evening light. Whistling. He needed to breathe. He stopped abruptly and gulped in the cold air. Maybe that's what his mother meant it to be - something to do that it takes so much effort you forgot whatever you were panicking about. He stopped running, heard himself gasp for air. Oh this was just not going to work, was it?

Voices-

Fishlegs popped his head up. They were familiar. _They were familiar!_ He perked, stepped forward, didn't know which way to go, oh too many trees. _Trees, get out of my way right now_. Hiccup and Astrid- "Hiccup! Astrid!" he shouted. "Hiccup!" He stepped around a tree, found the blonde head and the struggling shape behind it. They looked ridiculously wet right now, but of course that didn't matter. He _found_ them. "Astrid!" he shouted.

She whirled her head up, surprised. Her hands shoved forward in some shadow motion, like her axe was still in her grasp. "Hey it's me-" He jumped forward, still exhilarated at locating them.

"Fishlegs." Hiccup's voice was tired. Fishlegs frowned. "I- I hate to make you any sadder, Hiccup, but . . . the kids - they left and started for the town, the Skirra Vellite town. The big bad place. In baskets-"

Hiccup raised a brow. Fishlegs paused. He was talking too fast, and Astrid was looking at him like he'd just lost his rocker. "Snotlout and the twins, they found these Skirra Vellites on horses collecting, uh, like _water_ and they just went down the hill and . . . hid in the baskets." He gave a lopsided smile.

Hiccup looked at Astrid and she shrugged. "_Fishlegs_", you better explain yourself. We know the kids are going after the town. Right?" Her last word was almost critical, and a shaft of evening light cut across her face in a threatening angle. Fishlegs cleared his throat. "Well, sure Astrid . . . when you said the direction-" He gestured with his hands, pointing towards the town. "-they took off and brought me with them."

Hiccup stepped up to him suddenly. "Did they reach the town?" His voice was strangely serious and Fishlegs got a feeling he wasn't feeling all too well. "You all right, Hiccup?"

Hiccup brushed him off, made a motion with his hand for Fishlegs to continue. He jumped a little, felt a bit like there was some kind of subtle panic going on here. _Though I guess that sort of made sense considering the situation. Though of course-_ "Uh!" He snapped out of himself ". . . no, I mean I _don't_ know, I wasn't with them." Fishlegs popped his lips. "For all I know they could be, like, captured or something horrible."

Hiccup started backwards, threw an irritated hand into his hair and scratched his head, his eyes full of thoughts. He'd never seen Hiccup so flustered, and it honestly worried him. Fishlegs put his hands out to him. "But we can catch up, right? We can try."

"Of course we have to try, that's the only thing we can do right now." Astrid's voice was dry, almost sarcastic, and it surprised Fishlegs. There was something up in the air, he could tell. He wanted to make a remark about it, but suddenly Astrid was heading off in the direction of the town, Hiccup, his head low, following her, silently, almost sadly and yet with a touch of anger that made Fishlegs pause.

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Toothless knew that the screams meant attack, meant _fury_, but they only sounded like loneliness to him. They were on the outside, he on the inside.

It was the longest dragon raid he'd seen. Or rather, _heard_. The narrow openings in the dome above afforded a few glimpses of the battle outside. It wasn't like he needed to see much anyway, the sounds told him all he needed to know.

The screams of dragons reverberated into him even through the thickness of the rock dome, the sound ebbing away and surging as the shafts of sunlight shifted on the arena floor, the small windows of light now dark across the dome, only the light of stars and the fire of dragons punctuating through the narrow openings to the outside world. The passion hitting his ears fired something inside him, something guttural and hot, something he hadn't felt in a long time. It was itching, anxious, exciting, awful - _exhilarating_.

If only he could see what was happening. If only he could lead the raid himself.

They were putting up a valiant fight, but still something was terribly wrong. Dragon after dragon was being dragged through the arena, dragged in just like him, led through the ring doors past him into one of the many doors lining the ring, into some still darker

tunnels deeper inside the mountain. He'd seen humans capture dragons before, on the old raids on Berk, but never in this large of a number. Something was in the air, something haunting . . . the same fate multiplied a hundred times over, an unknown, fearful destiny awaiting them all.

A dragon raid always had a leader. He was used to that role in Berk. Something swept through him, simmered up his chest, the same guttural feeling he'd felt two summers ago. The delight of each blast, the euphoria of each high-speed escape. Diving unseen, striking unseen, destroying unseen. He always suggested the blackest of nights for the flight to Berk. Those nights, when he led the raids. . . .

The people had pushed him away from the new captives, fastened a rope to his collar and tightened it to a hook in the wall, leashing him to one side of the ring as the captured dragons passed opposite him. A hundred warriors and dragons must have passed by in one day. It pained him to see Nadders and Changewings and even Nightmares and Timberjacks bound and muzzled, cords enfolding their wings and eyes livid with fear. They whiplashed against the ropes in vain. He hummed something warm to these dragons sharing his fate_. _But they returned only with contempt in their eyes and taunts on their tongues.

Domestic dragon.

Human lover.

Traitor.

He could take those, he could live with someone telling lies about him. But traitor. Traitor . . . that was the worst.

He snarled at the insults, snarls faint in a throat parched shut with thirst. With every new captive who passed his way, he looked for a friendly eye, but the same scorn polluted each one.

The arena lay quiet now, a rare moment with no man or dragon in sight. Now was the time for him to work.

He lunged his head away from the wall. The wound tore into him and the collar pinched into his neck. He snarled at the rope. It tautened into the stone wall around a hook as unbreakable as dragon teeth. He lunged again; the rope held. Spasms shot through his shoulder. He shifted his weight on his three feet, kept his front right leg carefully lifted above the stone floor, only the tips of his claws brushing against the stone. His side felt raw and open. Flies bit into the flesh. He flicked his head at the intolerable insects, a tick running through his right shoulder as another spasm cut into him.

The skin broke. A new surge coursed down his side. It streamed down his scales into the cracks in the stone. It pooled under his feet and reflected back his own weary eyes.

He clenched his jaws. That's all he needed right now.

No matter how much it crusted dry over his chest and leg and filtered into the corners of his toes, the wound always broke again. With every renewed flow, his senses seemed to dull. The pool of blood

deepened below him. His claws struck the reflections, echoed ripples across the surface. Beautiful, gentle ripples like the sea. To fall into that sea, rest his body and slip into its softness. Just fall asleep. Lovely, intoxicating sleep.

The feeling hazed over his senses and weakened his legs. The pain receded. Sounds faded and his vision darkened.

He jerked his head back. He shook it tightly and opened his eyes wide. Somehow, he didn't feel comfortable giving in to this. Ordinary sleep wouldn't dull his senses like that. He barely exerted himself all day, yet a profound exhaustion had settled into his core.

He needed the rest. He didn't have much left to run on. Apart from small fishes thrown his way, he hadn't eaten or drunk water in days. Hunger and thirst throbbed in tandem with his pain. Yet now both rhythms faded before a stronger urge, a drive harder to resist than all the hunger and pain and thirst combined.

Could it be . . . the wound draining life out of him?

He glanced down at the red pool underneath his feet, held still to quell the ripples and his racing heart. A black face and glowing eyes gazed back at him, dried froth lining its mouth. The image shifted its chapped lips under the strap, stared back at him, beckoned. What better way to revive himself?

He lowered his head and touched the snout of the image, breaking it. Inviting moisture lapped his nose, yet the smell sent a quiver through him. His head jerked back, his throat knotted. How could he drink his own blood?

Something sparked inside him. He flicked his tail harsh against the stone, grumbled long and low. Of course he could. He had to live. This wasn't Berk. No one will feed or shelter him anymore. This was the wild, and there were no rules.

He thrust his snout into the pool, edged open his mouth as far as possible. Moisture stung the cracks in his lips, but the liquid spiced warm and pungent in his throat. Didn't taste too bad, either. He lapped faster, slapped his snout into the pool with all his might.

A dragon scream halted his motions. The shriek splintered the night outside. A Skrill's scream.

Skari.

He raised his head, perked his ear flaps up, wetness dripping down his neck. That scream was unmistakable. And familiar. He'd used it on dragon raids himself. A herald to the comrades, a calling to strike now with all fires blasting. _Strike the stronghold._

He tensed. On instinct, he crouched low.

The walls vibrated near him. He jolted his head up, eyed the slants of windows in the dome. A curtain of fire flashed by. Embers sparked through the small windows, fell down the vast vertical space of the dome like shooting stars in the blackest of nights. He sniffed at the sparks touching his nose. _Timberjacks_.

A flash of embers tickled over his wings, landed on his forehead. He jerked instinctively from the fire's touch, pulled away from the wall, but the leash pulled taut.

Suddenly fire pulsed into the dome above, waved through the narrow slitted openings of the dome. As bright as day, like that night sixty summers ago. Blue lightning fire. That horrid fire.

He jerked on the leash; the edifice shuddered. Lightning streaked through the windows and shot across the dome. The yawning space above him lit up like a night storm. Sparks slashed across the stone surface, down the walls, and over the arena rim. The lightning raced towards him.

He bunched his legs and leapt in the air. A cry seared through his teeth. The crackling fire swept under him and the energy blasted cold, numbing fire by his right side nearest the wall. The numbing coldness flashed through his mind. His feet landed smack on the stone; the impact cut into his shoulder.

The lightning flashed beyond him.

He cringed his neck in a tight curl. He panted hard and fast, blinked several times, held still until the biting pain subsided. He'd escaped the worst. He glanced over to the center of the ring, where the blue fire died. A tremor shivered through his back, but no more lightning shuddered the structure over him. The dome stood, unfazed.

What was he afraid of? Only a Night Fury's fire could crack this thing open.

He tossed his head and hummed. Skrills can be such show-offs.

I'd never waste fire on a rock like this if I were you. Go for the rock-launchers, Skari. Just my luck I'm stuck in one of your ill-chosen targets.

For all its bluster, Skari's lightning failed to shatter the rock. He almost wished the dome had cracked, but that would be wishing his own doom.

His humming subsided. He should be grateful to be trapped under this thing, considering what that fire could do to him. His father's death was not a laughing matter.

He flicked his head, glanced upward at the now quiet openings in the high dome. Fires crackled in the distance. Skari's shrieking echoed into the night, joined the elated cries of fellow dragons. The way they called and the Skrill answered, the way he directed their movements, he must be the raiding leader.

He felt it all along and it made sense - that Skari would take over a place, find a way to be at the top of the pecking order in the area. He was the raid leader, and he was here, calling the shots. He knew Skari, knew enough of him to recognize that he'd be the type to pollute the minds of his subjects, as subjects they'd probably be. The way the Timberjacks acted around him made him out to be a king, and Toothless was sure Skari used that power to drive home his

schemes, whatever they were - and this traitorous hate for himself was probably a part of that. Skari would be one to mar his name. Toothless hissed. He didn't care what dragons thought of him, but the fact that Skari had to go out of his way to do such a thing . . . burned him inside.

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It wouldn't be long now before he reached the town and Toothless.

Hiccup grabbed the rocky outcrop above him, a mash of black shadows hard to see in the dimming twilight. Astrid and Fishlegs toiled somewhere down below him on the ridge. He'd run over in his mind - countless times - the various ways a dragon could be captured. Ropes, chains, behind bars or solid rock enclosures, like the kill ring at Berk.

Hopefully the knife he brought would be sufficient to get Toothless out. But it wasn't the physical bonds, really, that concerned him. He was afraid to think of what Toothless the dragon would do, how this kind of capture might affect him, or how much of his wild side might be triggered in the face of uncaring captors.

As much as he wished his worry was uncalled for, he knew it was better than the alternative: that he wouldn't have to worry about Toothless' welfare because the hunt might have happened already.

His jaw locked, and a tenseness flickered through him. He lifted his good foot onto a higher cleft in the rock. He didn't know the Skirra VÃ©l, didn't know if they held the hunt in the middle of a war, or if it didn't matter - or how they'd run such a thing at all, with a wild rearing dragon as the victim.

Toothless could beat them.

And yet . . . what if he was too late?

It wasn't a time to think of that. Panic did no one any good. He had a solid head on his shoulders, Toothless needed him to have a solid head on his shoulders.

He jumped to the gentler part of the slope, the top of the ridge now incredibly close. He had to concentrate. He leaned his head up, tried to look past the tiny summit of the ridge. Way out there, over the town - the mad congregation of dragons, hot and angry and incredibly large. The many hours the three of them had trudged through the Herkja landscape, they'd watched the raid gather, watched it loom over the region over the hill, like a strange hub of attraction, mysterious and throbbing. The screams were sharp and yet mottled in the distance, haunting in the cluttered hum punctuated by cries of both pain and pure unadulterated fury.

And the fire - from both the sky and the ground. It was different fire, some type of new fire, which meant new dragons, than the ones on Berk. And countering that, great masses of Skirra VÃ©llite fire, great efficient clusters of boulders aflame, thrown out in synchronized order, in tight groups so the targeted dragon could barely stand a chance. But the organization and number of those catapults . . .

He had a bad feeling that weaponry here was far superior to that of his Dad's.

He inhaled, squinted and looked out at the dimming light. It was getting dark now. The night was already here. The town was lit with fire, and from the plumes of smoke, he could tell that the dragons were giving a good fight. It was odd - like they had a purpose in the raid. This was different from the raids at Berk. This wasn't for food. No. There was something else.

He felt a hand suddenly at his side, turned and saw Astrid brushing by him, the grunt of Fishlegs close by. He looked down, frowned to see Fishlegs struggling about twelve armslengths from him. The poor guy had not been ready for a trip like this - hauling in miles of walking towards the town, back and towards it again. He wasn't made for so much physical labor.

Of course, neither was he. But it was easier to sympathize with somebody else at the moment.

He looked at Astrid, her narrow eyes taking in the chaos in the distance. He watched a moment, the stillness strong between them. She dug her fingers into the dirt of the edge of the ledge, clamored over the summit and swung herself over past Hiccup. He heard a sharp sigh escape her and she whirled around, eyed him and urged him forward with a hand.

They hadn't really spoken much at all that day, not after what happened in the river. It hurt him, he wasn't going to pretend it didn't. But just because he lost something didn't mean he was going to give up. Toothless still came first in his mind, but she had a point, she had a terribly relevant point. His Dad, his tribe, needed him back home. Those dragons - he didn't want to think about it, the massacre of so many on Berk.

If he could just get to Toothless, he could go back and do something. He just had to get Toothless . . . He closed his eyes a moment, imagined his friend, tried to focus, to put the screams of the dragon raid out of his mind.

"You coming?"

He looked up, saw Astrid, her face hidden in the shadow from the faint glow of sunlight behind her. There was a firm seriousness in her expression, something he was almost tired of looking at all day long. It's not like he wanted her to be happy so much as he wanted her to trust him again. To smile at least through this. Something of confidence. Right now . . . He looked away. Maybe it was too much to ask for, anyway. She was mostly right.

He nodded to her and put his hand out. She took it and hauled him up on the ledge. He exhaled sharply, the cold night air starting to nip at his extremities. He heard the dragon screams again, could feel wingbeats in the air, looked up and saw a great flock of dragons flying past them, silhouetted against the darkening sky, large looming figures, determined and almost slow in their passage towards the fiery town in the distance.

They were so much closer now to the town, close enough to make her

nervous, he could tell. She was strumming her fingers now, the palm on her hip. He turned around and leaned over the edge, put his hand out for Fishlegs, who was coming up now. "Thanks," Fishlegs huffed, the boy clearly out of breath.

"Yeah, that's okay." Hiccup pulled him up, and the teen got himself on the ledge alongside Hiccup and Astrid. Astrid pointed to the town, ignored Fishlegs. "It's not far now," she said simply. She sighed, squinted up at the dragon flock again.

Hiccup cleared his throat, touched Fishlegs' arm. "Maybe you go on ahead. I want to talk to Astrid." He kept his voice hushed.

"Oh." Fishlegs looked at Astrid, back at Hiccup. "Something bad happened? Sorry to notice, but I did get a feeling like you two weren't on the best terms."

Hiccup nodded briefly, inhaled. "Yeah . . . a little thing about responsibility."

"Oh . . . ?"

Hiccup scratched the base of his neck. "That I should have stayed in Berk and took care of the dragons." He paused, brought his hand down and stared at it for a moment. He needed to explain things to Astrid. If he was going to be on this journey, on this dangerous mess he got them in - he needed to talk to her. He looked up at Fishlegs, found the teen's face puckered in concern and cast in a yellow-pink glow of incoming night. He gestured Fishlegs towards the other end of the slope. "- if you don't mind?"

"Oh- oh!" Fishlegs waved his hands back and forth. "I'm sorry. I'll go." He stumbled over down the slope on this side of the hill, looking over his shoulder awkwardly and trying to make some sort of smile expression. He knew something was up. Hiccup took a deep breath. "Astrid?" He turned to her, found out she was already staring at him.

"I think we had that talk already, Hiccup," she said simply.

"You don't understand, Astrid, I need to be here - for Toothless. I can't do anything without him. Remember Alvin? Before he died . . . way back, when we kept the dragons on Dragon Island, and Dad thought I was doing something stupid going after Alvin myself? Maybe this isn't so different. Maybe I need Toothless before I can do anything."

She eyed him critically. "Maybe . . ." The quiet word offered no confidence. She shrugged, looked back up at the sky. It was a closed deal, or Astrid was trying to make it that way. It wouldn't be wise to push it, would it?

He followed her gaze, as she started stepping down the slope towards the town. The treetops opened up along the slope below them, revealed a vast valley stretching out and rising into a range of smoking peaks on the opposite side. Spread out to the left was the interior of the island, a crescent-shaped natural harbor opening to the sea to the right. Ships clustered in the crescent's apex.

And framed in the center was the town - a dark, burning mass of

houses and grass-roofed huts, a sprawling expanse easily six times larger than Berk. Great rows of houses circled and centered upon a central uplift, a dome-like hill at the edge of the town that rose into the mountains far on the other side. Massive structures rose up above the houses with fires in their great bowls, rows of catapults surrounding the town on all sides firing hot and angry into the sky still thick with dragons.

Familiar dragons - Timberjacks, their massive wings wide and threatening against the fading twilight, Snaptrappers, liquid in their movement, swimming through the sky bobbing their four heads, and tiny dragons like Terrors except he couldn't make out if they were in fact not a new variety he'd not known before. And then the Skrill, he could locate that one anywhere, flashing in and out of the dark cover of night-darkened clouds, shrieking among the dragons around him, the others responding, almost like they were following him. Bolts of lightning flashed out of the distinctive jaws, into the town. There were old dragons he knew at home, strange dragons that seemed familiar, and yet there was something new. . . .

In the light of the fires, dragons on the ground, unable to escape. He could see clusters of them, trapped it seemed. "Astrid-" He stepped forward, caught up with her, put a hand on her arm suddenly. "It's dragon cages, they're capturing the dragons. That's why the dragons are so angry. That's why-"

She peered at him. "Why?" Her eyes sparked with life, _action_.

Toothless. What if- "Maybe Toothless is in one of those cages. They're not killing the dragons, they're still alive-" He leapt forward, his breath fast suddenly.

"Hiccup-!"

He didn't pause for her, kept running down the hill, through the thick tall grasses and praying his prosthetic wasn't going to slip.

"_Hold it_, Hiccup." Her voice was suddenly sharp.

He slowed, didn't stop, but slowed . . . Her breath came louder in his ears, and she was next to him, grabbing his arm, the night now a harsh black on her round face. "You think you're so close you can just traipse in there. I know how impetuous you are."

He sped up faster, getting a streak of something rebellious in him. "It's dark and from the looks of things, they got more stuff to worry about than a dead Hooligan kid."

He heard a heave of breath, knew she was trying to gain on him. "Don't you get it? That's just the point. Your resurrection is going to crack some helmets down there and our whole cover will be blown." She grabbed his arm abruptly, whirled him and stopped him. "Let me and the kids go in first, to scout where Toothless is."

It was his time to be tough. She wanted a leader? Well she was going to get one. "I'm not going to sit here and twiddle my thumbs, Astrid. They've seen all of us, so it wouldn't matter who they see now. As if I'm going to run in there without some kind of plan, anyway." He bent

down, dug his fingers into the muddy earth below and smeared his face. He was angry now, he could feel it. A strange feeling. He locked eyes with her. "This thing we're doing here is _dangerous_. I'm not going to let you guys run in there alone. This is my fight. And if it's true I'm the one who messed up, _I'm_ the one going to fix it."

Astrid raised a brow, didn't let go of the stare between them. "And this is a good idea?" She touched his cheek, swiped the mud from it. "You can't even protect yourself. It's _never_ been one of your strong points." She moved her hand in the way she would as if her trusty axe was still in her grip. "This is war here, and what do you have - a tiny knife to defend six people who don't know what they're stepping into. You need to be prepared to kill in a place like this. You need to be prepared to do things you've never done before. Yeah, it's serious. What you did was _serious_."

He bit his lip, kept the gaze. How did she always have a point? Something new to haunt him? He couldn't bring himself to sink a weapon into a captured dragon. . . so to wield it against an actual human being?

She broke the stare, passed him and slowly paced on down the hillside through the grass. He watched her, her silhouette against the sunset, her thin form against the beauty of the sky, against the scream of the dragons that still haunted the clouds, against the forest and the grass and the valley below.

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The last hints of sunset had completely disappeared by the time they reached the couple first houses of the town, and the rush of dragons seemed to have eased. The dark shape of a grass-roofed hut shadowed him from the light of the rising moon. Hiccup inhaled - something he'd been doing in almost gasping spurts for a while now, ever since he and Astrid and Fishlegs finally got into the shadow of this place. A prick tingled along the skin of his hands, his chest rising and falling faster. It was almost an excitement, yet a strange frightened excitement running through him and making his body sting, like he was about to do something dangerous and he knew it. He glanced back and forth, cautious, breathed in the pungent, moist odor of the living grass growing along the backside of the hut. He stopped, almost afraid to move, stopped breathing for a moment, almost expecting a crunch in the grass on either side of him. For a second he expected the kids or Snotlout to jump out . . . wishful thinking.

No one was in sight, and only a hot crackling sound broke the silence. He neared the hut, peered around its back towards the right, where another house, a wooden half-ship structure, was crackling in flames undoubtedly set by a wild dragon. The gaseous hot air licked up into the starry night and the embers sparked past him. The heat fanned his face and parched the moist mud on his cheeks. He felt a body near him, Astrid's, right behind him, and then the jolt of Fishlegs' body shoved up against them both. He turned away from the crackling fire, saw Astrid's mud-smeared face suddenly tighten and her blue eyes widen, looking past him. He turned to look back but she grabbed his arm and pulled him away, and Fishlegs sputtered something panicked and high-pitched.

"_Pouvez-vous m'aider?_"

Some foreign voice, behind them. He whipped his head around, his heart shoving into his throat. She was just a few feet away, the small silhouette against the blinding light of the burning house.

They could take care of this, he could. Hiccup stepped forward from the other two. The woman focused on him, smiled, approached with several wooden buckets in her arms. She nudged the buckets towards them, hummed something like she was asking if they understood. Her eye flicked towards someone behind him and Hiccup turned, saw Fishlegs shake his head in a sort of trance, his eyes locked with fear.

"Need- help," she hummed, motioning with her hands towards the burning houses behind her. Her Norse was broken, forced, her voice thick with an unknown accent. He glanced up at her face again, that strangely foreign face, and the stain on her right temple, that rounded, dragon-headed pattern. He'd seen it on that slave Hervi before, the landmark.

She stepped closer and suddenly a flicker of light from one of the burning houses touched her. She was slightly-built, surely still in her thirties and yet she looked older. Her dark hair was tangled, her plain wool dress was stained and ripped, and her feet - they were bare and even in the night he could tell they were hard and calloused.

She was a slave, another one like Hervi, and this was the place where slavery was alive, where slave selling still happened, where the things that piqued his conscience back at the Great Hall when these people were friendly - where these things happened. A forceful sense of compassion filled him, and he stepped forward.

"Help?" she said, a suggestive lilt in her voice. She must have been European, from some tribe on the mainland. She clacked the buckets towards them, an almost desperation in her voice. The fires behind her were thick and growing, and there were still shouts of dragons and Vikings all over the landscape, thuds of explosions that marked yet more hubs of destruction.

"Excuse us, ma'am, but we're kind of . . . busy."

Hiccup turned around, suddenly remembered Fishlegs' voice and saw him quivering there, pointing out the understated fact with a chubby finger. Astrid was staring back at him, searching for his eyes, trying to say something committed and firm. Her eyes narrowed ever so slightly, but he could tell something hot and angry was behind them. He raised his brows. It wasn't hard to figure out her conviction on this matter.

This person is a slave, she needs **help**.

That help is going to get us killed.

Everything I do here is going to get us killed.

You're here just for Toothless, you're **not** here to be a hero.

I won't walk away from this, Astrid. Not like this.

Hiccup narrowed his eyes at her, broke the stare. She wanted to make him stop caring, she wanted to make him drop everything to get back to Berk. He left her, with her fists in tight balls hanging down her side, turned and went up to the slave woman, taking one of the buckets from her arms. The woman smiled down at him, like some soft vision. "Oui! C'est gÃ©nial!" she said, a beautiful, honest sincerity in her voice. This close, he could see the wrinkles under her eyes, the strain in her face, the evidence of years of labor etched in her features. He couldn't imagine what it was like to live this kind of life, to live in service to strangers and enemies.

He fumbled the bucket in his hand, let the weight rest on his good arm, kept in step with her as she turned around and walked down into the smoke and buzz of the town behind her. She said something quick and commanding, in that foreign tongue, her arm flinging behind her in some forward motion. Hiccup looked back, saw Fishlegs a step ahead of Astrid, an uncertainty in his step, Astrid firmly still, her arms crossed and her eyes shifting down at her boots. Fishlegs said something and Astrid looked up, turned a narrow gaze to Hiccup.

He looked away, looked out at the town, the destruction in the darkness. He could feel the heat searing in the atmosphere, smell the strange thickness of ash in his lungs. A mix of dull blue light and sharp orange color played across his path, black shadows from the houses around jutting into the colors. The structures were parting, encircling something black and glinting. Burly men and lanky teens, hands lugging buckets, stood in a disorderly mass in front of ten huge barrels pumping out water through spigots. The slave woman stepped into the mass, glanced back and motioned her hand for him. She blurted out something in her native tongue, whipped a hand at the crowds, pushed through towards the source of water. There was a hum in the crowds, a grumble and laughter, as she found a path in the disorganization. He heard the splash of water, and suddenly saw her beckoning him, her arms heavy with buckets wet and spilling with water. The people around glanced at him, set their eyes and almost smiled at him, their faces dusky from smoke and toil. It was a strange mixture - faces he knew belonged in other tribes and cultures. One crooked figure stepped up to him, almost threatening, hummed some words he couldn't understand. "Huh?" he whispered, leaning back, scuffing the dirt with his prosthetic. The stranger looked down at his metal leg, squinted, and Hiccup followed his gaze, realized - hoped the fact of his disability was not something that might give him away. It was such a simple thing, hopefully lost in the fact that missing limbs were a way of life with Vikings in general. And maybe Heather hadn't gotten around to putting out descriptions of him to her people. After all, he was supposed to be dead.

He stared back at the inquiring face that was taking him in. Only the Skirra Vellite Council would recognize him, that and Heather. Here he was relatively safe, or so he tried to believe. The stranger hummed something, still in that foreign tongue, barely audible, and twitched a finger over Hiccup's cheek. A chip of caked mud flecked off, and Hiccup stepped back, around him, and tried to move forward. The stranger grumbled something, let him pass, and looked down before melding into the crowds again. Hiccup watched him, felt the weight in his movement, like age despite the fact that he looked just about as young as the woman who led him here. And the landmark - also there

present on the left side of his face, closer to his cheek. Hiccup let his eyes wander, tried not to look like he was intruding, or watching . . . noticed that most of them had the mark, young ones and old ones, even children. And those who didn't have the mark seemed to carry themselves with a sort of authority over the others, that despite the shared role among them, held a distance from those with it.

A rush of some warm breeze tickled over his cheek and he blinked in the irritation of the ash that clouded near his eyes. He squinted, turned and went towards the water source, the slave woman still holding the spigot ready for him. He shoved his bucket under the flow of water, and she waved him off, her hands motioning towards one of the many flaming structures. He nodded briefly, backed out of the crowds and got lost in the hum of people that flowed around him suddenly. A short distance from him, outside the crowd, he could see Astrid and Fishlegs, looking expectantly at him, not quite sure what he was doing.

He turned from them, started for one of the burning houses. Maybe he didn't quite know himself. He just wanted to help, wanted to relieve some of the hardship that he read in that woman's face, and somehow do something that he believed was right. He moved to a house where irritated shouts of Vikings still stung the air. And maybe it was more about Astrid than anything. He turned back and watched her, her expression something like scorn now, yet tired.

It was hot now, the air around him, and he looked ahead, saw the house on fire in front of him, the flames flickering and almost beautiful. Heavy, tall Skirra Vellites passed him, shouts in the air, and the occasional swoosh of a woman's dress. He threw his bucketful of water into the flames, watched the small segment hiss into ash, black and crumbled, like a patch of shadow in the midst of orange.

What could he do in this place? He came here for one reason, to help Toothless, to get out and do something for his Dad. The slave girl . . . he pitied her, wanted to help her, but really, what could he really hope to accomplish here for her? He sat the empty bucket down on the ground.

"Hey, are you Irish?"

He whirled, at the peppy voice behind him. She was a young girl, something like his age. "Where'd you get so dirty?" She stepped up to him suddenly, smacked a wet hand against his face.

"Hey-"

She pulled her hand away, flapped the mud off of it.

He looked her down, clapped a hand to his own cheek and rubbed off the sting of her sudden contact.

"What's your problem, Pretty Face?" she hummed, smirking at him. "I asked a question, you Irish?"

"Don't be stupid, sis, he's got no slavemark, 'course he ain't Irish . . ."

Hiccup stepped back, suddenly saw a new face, a tall lanky teen with curly, messed-up hair. He looked back at the sister, and she leered back, giggled suddenly. He pulled back, a bit confused. She was an impetuous young girl, slim in a blue-gray furred coat and a belted tan tunic, her white face long and her hair even longer and whiter, a blond so white and cold it was like the the moon. Unbraided except for two little strands that ribboned around the side of her head and connected in the back.

"You lookin' at me, boy?" she lisped suddenly, the orange of the fires around playing off her sharp features.

Hiccup blinked, shook his head. "No - no, I was just--"

"Well, that's all right by me, so don't fret." She twirled a finger around her hair. Her brother came up behind her, his expression like there was something wrong in the air. She continued to stare at Hiccup. "So where you from? I haven't seen you around, and I--"

Her brother suddenly pinched her in the arm. "Hey!" she shrieked, glared at him.

Hiccup winced. "Sure I better just, you know - _go_. . ."

"Olaf, look watcha did, you scared him. Listen, Pretty, don't go yet, I don't even know your name." She grabbed Hiccup's arm, the force surprising him. He locked eyes with her, found the pupils dark and heavy. "I really need to go right now, if that's all right." He jerked his arm away. She eyed him, a playfulness suddenly teasing up her expression. "Name's Tilda. You?"

Hiccup stepped around her, noticed Astrid suddenly afar, Fishlegs holding her back. She was on the verge of bursting out of the hold, jumping out of Fishlegs' grasp. This Tilda person was just a little too pushy, something he didn't need right now. Dragon screams were still hot in the air, distant but hot. Ash was thick everywhere, and this little confrontation was getting some attention from the surrounding slaves and Skirra VÃ©llites. It was making him cringe. He stepped away, turned, realized he couldn't head back to Astrid and Fishlegs. Not now. He couldn't bring attention to them.

"Wanna chill at the dragon cages?" Tilda's cool voice was suddenly near his ear. He bit his lip, wanted to get out of here . . .

But the dragon cages . . .

"There's some awesome new dragons they got there."

Hiccup paused suddenly, looked down. "What dragons?" Maybe . . .

Toothless . . . if he was there and the town was so big and this person seemed to know something about the dragons this people were caging.

"How would _I_ know? I ain't no dragon expert. Sheesh." She stepped away, and he could feel her sigh. He turned his head up, looked at her. She had her arms crossed in some sort of irritation. He wanted to ask her what they were doing with the dragons, what they were capturing them for. It was in such a large number, in such a seeming

hurry, and it fit with what happened back at Berk. There weren't too many options, really, when it came down to it . . .

"How fast can they train these guys now?" he said, slowly, looked at her, prodding her gray eyes.

Her brow raised. "The big shots are pretty new at this stuff. Week, maybe less? How should I know?"

Hiccup felt his heart flicker suddenly. So that was what they were up to at Berk, picking their brains and getting every Hooligan on Berk to trust them. That's what they were up to, that Heather snuggling up to Toothless, stealing Toothless. Killing so many dragons and now enslaving so many more. He closed his eyes, inhaled. They couldn't be as efficient as the Academy was at dragons. He might have shared his secrets, but he hadn't shared himself, and while he didn't intend to brag, but he could do things with dragons nobody else could. He wasn't a Dragon Whisperer for nothing. The Skirra VÃ©llites couldn't dream of being such a thing, and no one who treated dragons in the way he figured they'd treat them - like mercenaries. No dragon would take that. So Berk still had a chance, then?

Yeah if he was there . . .

He opened his eyes. He needed to know more about this training thing they had going, he needed to know how far along they were on it, how they hoped to train them, and what he could do to stop it. Because if they had dragons, if they could use them the way Berk could Berk was saved because of their dragon force. If the Skirra VÃ©l was hoping to even the odds, a successful run at dragon training might just balance the scales.

She was still looking at him, a hint of something curious, honestly curious crossing her face. She drew her finger up, curled her hair around her ear. "But you, maybe you know something about dragons? Sounds like it . . ."

Hiccup narrowed his eyes. ". . . yeah?" he mumbled, glanced at Astrid, who was holding back now, eyeing him with a questioning look. He nodded ever so gently to her, hoped she'd understand. "I'm very interested in dragons," he hummed.

She leaned in and put a hand on his shoulder, got her face close to his and whispered, "Then you have a date."

"This is just great . . ."

It was her brother.

"Shut up, Olaf."

22. Chapter 19: A Special Dragon

a/n: Sorry it's a shorter chapter, but Christmas stuff got in the way XD Hope you enjoy this anyway!

View the illustration at the official webpage. Put a period where the dashes are: [howtotrainyourdragon2 - thecomicseries - com](http://howtotrainyourdragon2-thecomicseries-com)
>or at my deviantArt gallery: [inhonoredglory - deviantart - gallery - 38855965](http://inhonoredglory-deviantart-gallery-38855965)<p>

* * *

><p>How to Train Your Dragon II
>The Dragon Whisperer

**Act II
>A World Shattered
**

**Chapter 19
>A Special Dragon
**

Hiccup was tired. Maybe not so much physically but mentally. The thick forest of cages, like a prison of metal - and the fact that Toothless was still not among them. . . . How many cages were there? How much time would it take? There were so many dragons, bound and trapped behind those makeshift, dented, bent bars. Hiccup felt a gasp of disgust and horror fight its way in his throat, and he battled the urge to run up to each lock and free the captives.

But he couldn't do anything like that now. He needed to keep his cover. For his father and for his tribe - and for Toothless.

He hadn't wanted to think about him. He hadn't wanted to think about the reason he was here. It was weird, and it didn't make sense. Maybe it was self defense. That was a word he heard from Gobber in that training that seemed so long ago, a word he heard from his father when he talked about war. It was something he knew could refer to people and, and to _fear_.

Self defense. It was why he filled his head with worrying about the kids, about the understandably tricky situation surrounding the loving stupidity that was this mission of his.

But now as he was walking past dragons, finally within reach of the dragon he loved - it all came crashing back to him, rushing into his heart and mind like a flood, with an intensity of longing greater than that time he and Toothless were separated that winter a year ago, the three days of separation after he gave Toothless his freedom. It didn't make it any easier that now he'd given his best friend his captivity.

Hiccup smarted under the idea of his own thoughts. If he could change time, if he could relive that flight in the storm on Toothless, or the sunset before Induction, days that seemed so normal, so ordinary, and yet so precious. Toothless' smooth scales under him, the weight and throb of his body, the thrilling force of his wings, the hum of love from his throat, and the eyes that said so much, that spoke to him like nothing or no one had spoken to him in all his years of life on Berk.

Hiccup looked out at the foreign dragons around him, the dark foreign eyes, the spikes and colors, the folded, trapped wings and the blood that trickled down from where someone pulled too hard at a leash that was not built for comfort.

Toothless was special.

Toothless was . . . his. Hiccup shut his eyes, tried to remember the life in those eyes, cursed himself to think that the skill he taught these people may snuff out the life of not only his best friend but

his tribe. He ran a hand through his hair suddenly, looked out and let his eyes focus in the semi-darkness again. He had to stop the plan these people were having, whatever it was, he was in a place to do something now.

He looked around. _Focus, Hiccup_. . . Astrid played those words on him before, always with a sort of happy teasing from the old days. She was there, somewhere in the shadows. Tilda was there, and her brother. The so-called date.

She was crazy. He'd figured that out a while ago, and early on he could feel Astrid hovering over them, no doubt wanting to come out and spit in the girl's face. She _was_ a little forward. But Hiccup was almost amused by it all. He wasn't going to take it seriously, but he wasn't going to give her slack, either. He was here for Toothless, and none of this was going to change his focus.

Tilda waved her hand at him suddenly, gestured at the Timberjacks squirming behind her. "Sooooo." Her lips were pursed together and she stared up at him obnoxiously. 'We've _had_ our tour of the dragons.' She peeked at him, suggestively.

He pulled back slightly, wary.

"Hey, I like the silent type, but you're the _silent_ type-"

"Umm-"

She slapped an arm over his shoulder, pulled him forward. "Hey-" Hiccup winced, didn't want to screech at the pain of his shoulder, which was quite justified in smarting to her sudden grasp.

"But quiet is cool," she continued, blissfully oblivious. "This way I don't get interrupted, like it is with _certain_ individuals." She leaned forward and glared at her brother. Hiccup huffed a breath, the pressure turning his shoulder.

"Bull." Her brother was suddenly next to him, branding his fist in a mock threatening way.

"Bull on you, bro." She swept Hiccup forward. "I'm thinking of heading over to my place. This dragon tour is getting boring. You wanna come?"

Hiccup narrowed his eyes at her, didn't dare look out for Astrid somewhere in the corners and cervices between the cages. If she was there, she'd be a fool to step out now, for whatever reason. They didn't dare break cover, and she'd have to trust him that he wasn't going to do something stupid. But trust wasn't exactly something he had in large quantities when it came to Astrid. He could imagine her stepping out now, making a scene of some sort, saving him from this jam. He needed to act, and he needed to act now.

"Tilda-" He grabbed her hand and stepped forward, left foot forward into the dirt. "I saw an interesting dragon this way." He made a turn around one of the cages, headed for some random cage that was nestled in a dark corner behind a row of metal. The hiss of dragons smacked in his ears, the lash of hate from these captive creatures. He kept dragging her hand forward, looking into the scared, angry, desperate

eyes that were flashing gold and black and red on him. Hate, hate for everything, for their lot and the people who put them there and who could blame them? His hand got clammy and he pulled on. Somehow she was laughing there behind him. He could hardly pay attention.

"Hey where the boy's takin' ya?" Her brother was panting at his side.

"I don't _know_- some dragon he's so interested in." Tilda snorted, laughed again. "What's it this time, a Night Fury?"

Hiccup's heart stopped.

He released her and stared in at the cage, held the bar. Waited.

Waited for her to clarify that.

"And this is it?" she hummed casually, holding the bar next to him. "Just a stupid Gronckle in here."

He turned to her. He couldn't look too serious. _Don't look too serious_. "What do you mean Night Fury?"

"You mean you don't know Night Furies? And I thought you were a dragon enthusiast." She scoffed, flickered her eyes at him.

He swallowed. "I know about Night Furies. But, why would you think of mentioning that one specifically, out of-" Boy, this was coming out wrong. He was raising suspicion. He looked at her, carefully. She was giving him a disgusting confused expression that he figured even the most rude Viking warrior would not have the facial muscles to create.

"Sis, you're gonna creep out the dude," her brother giggled.

Hiccup glanced at him, the tall teen laughing into his open palms.

"Olaf, shut your trap." Her face returned to a semblance of normalcy and she snapped a look at her brother. "Yes, you. You obsessed-with-dragons you." She stepped away from Hiccup now and was sticking her face into her brother's.

"You're always criticizing my hobbies," Olaf gave his innocence look.

"Because you're always making them into something- _bigger_ than they are!" Her arms were all over the place now.

"What - bigger than a dragon? Tilda, don't make me laugh."

Hiccup cringed, tried to shrink away.

She stuck her fists to her hips. "Don't get cute with me. You know what I'm talking about. You think these, these _pests_ are more important than the real stuff in life."

"Oh yeah? I'm going to be a warrior one day and I'm going to ride one of those beauties."

Ride?

"Oh _yeah_. You think it's so easy, just like that, eh? I could-" She snapped her fingers and suddenly cut herself short, her eye catching sight of Hiccup. Hiccup stood taller, her eye curious on him, like she forgot he was there. "Eh, sorry Pretty Face. The brother here's a nut about dragons. Thinks he can take one of those beasts home, like a stupid dog."

Hiccup felt his heart hum with something hot.

"Personally-" She leaned towards him, a leery grin on her lips. "All that fire is flashy and the flying _might_ be cool, but those dragons are just mindless brutes. Eat, sleep, kill you if you get in the way."

Hiccup felt his pulse quicken, his fists clench.

"They can all drop dead if you ask me." She spat on the ground, eyed her brother heavily.

The fire in Hiccup's heart tingled down his arms, and he hissed. "Dragons are _not_ killers," he said, his voice calm and clear and laced with conviction, into the night air.

She turned to look at him, raised a scruffy brow. "Oh, what are they? House pets?"

Her brother rolled his eyes.

"They can be _friends_ - if you treat them right." Hiccup stared at her, and he realized his tone was something a bit beyond your average passing Skirra VÃ©llite teen. He cleared his throat and looked a ways down the alley between the dragon cages, squinted his eyes in the dim lights from torches burning intermittently around the town.

"Treat them right?" She leaned back, glared at the lump of a Gronckle that was sitting densely in the cage in front of them. "And how exactly would you treat one of those things?"

It was the thing he'd be teaching at home for two years, the small amazing thing that changed everything about how dragons and humans interacted. When it came down to it, it wasn't that extraordinary. "With respect."

She leaned back, raised a brow. The brother peered at him, a sudden innocence in his eye. Hiccup blinked, realized this _wasn't_ Berk, and these people might not be keen on upsetting any status quo about dragons. They killed them, but then again - they did want to train them now, and he'd taught them a lot about how to, how to . . . _use_ them. Apparently, in the war against his Dad.

"You got some _strange_ beliefs, Pretty."

Hiccup looked up, saw Tilda staring him down with that contorted look on her face. He was getting queasy suddenly, and he just wanted to get out of here, out from these wacky kids. The dragon tour didn't do him much good, but he did get a lay of the land by now. He couldn't pretend anymore, he just wanted to be himself and get Toothless out.

All the mess of everything was getting to him, and he just wanted to let it go a moment. Be with Toothless. He needed him right now, to make things better again.

"I got to go, guys," he said, pushed past them and didn't look back. "Thanks for the tour."

"Pretty Face- you call that a _date?_"

He stopped, turned slightly back. "Maybe it wasn't a date after all. See you around, okay?" There was a weight in his voice, something he hadn't expected out of himself. Hopefully she wouldn't follow him. He turned a corner, another one, realized Skirra VÃ©llites - the enemy - were all around him, milling in and out with swords in their hands, the hum of blood and war on their lips, movements heavy and threatening, and the taunting laugh that when he looked, saw that they were directed at the captured creatures he would give anything to free.

And they think they could train dragons?

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He wanted to escape, really. Escape from this all. Toothless wasn't in the cages outside, and if a Night Fury meant so much to them that they'd make a special hunt for him, he wasn't about to believe they'd stick him with the others. He got this formal vibe out of the Skirra VÃ©llites, and when he saw the great shadow of their Great Hall, he knew these people would do something special with their prize dragons. The tall jagged walls of the structure, hewn from the mountain's edge, the dark volcanic rock, jagged and cut with unnatural marks made with rough, uneven hands. And the opening that was barred and blocked with wood.

It somehow sickened him. Why?

Men, _warriors_ passed him, their shadows dark in the stark lights from the torches lining the town. Even their laughs seemed foreign, and he stood there, on the edge of the main path, watched the flood of bodies and faces, looked at them, the individuals, even the women, some of the faces concerned, others exuberant, and some curious. And they always looked at the dragons, their demeanor almost disgusted by the presence of these creatures.

A heavy huff of breath burst out of him, and he turned away, kicked the grimy ground underneath his feet, his metal leg.

"Hey, you're kind of young for _that_."

Hiccup whirled, the voice - the youthful, childlike voice - surprising him.

"Over here!"

Hiccup squinted in the darkness, turned to his right and let the light adjust to the row of posts and the canvas of wood bars across them. And the kid - he was just a small child, looking up at him from behind the bars, behind this fenced-in area, squatting on the ground, rolling on his heels, a wide, toothy smile on his little face. Hiccup bent down, lower. "Uh-"

"Yeah that was me, I was talking to you!"

"Me?" Hiccup looked closer. Spiky red hair, a ridiculous grin, tattered clothing, behind the bars and so many more shadowed figures behind him, still and curious looking out in his direction. They were all waiting, sitting around without a purpose it seemed, and the faces - he knew a foreigner when he saw one, and here behind this fence, he could almost swear they all were foreign. A slow horror grew inside of him. He'd never seen something like this at home, even in other Viking tribes. Not in this quantity, not with this many people. And children, never with children, but here - this one kid in front of him, so- so happy. The dark shape on the side of the kid's head confirmed what he feared to admit. That this was a slave's pen and that these people were destined for a life of captivity.

He caught his breath, almost stepped away from the bars.

The kid squinted at him, made a face that would have been endearing were it not for the fact that it was ironic in this horrific circumstance.

"Aren't you going to ask me what's the matter? Or why I called you out?" The child's voice was so peppy.

Hiccup cleared his throat, awkwardly. "You're not . . . scared?"

"Scared? Of what?" The kid was almost laughing.

A sorrow weighed down his chest suddenly. Did the kid even know what was going on? Hiccup licked his lips, suddenly dry - he needed to drink or maybe he was getting nervous here in the midst of such a moral calamity.

"I said you're way too young for losing a leg." The little red-haired boy jostled his stubby finger down around Hiccup's left leg. "You don't have a beard yet." He grinned again.

Hiccup tried to smile, knew it was coming off wrong.

The boy made a face. "You look sick." He stepped back, poked a finger in his cheek and held his chin up.

Hiccup cleared his throat. "I feel sick."

"Got a cold?" The boy raised a brow. "I hope not, because I don't got no remedies for you, not my specialty."

Hiccup shook his head. "No, not that kind of sick." He bit his lip, opened his mouth to say something, wondered how to put it to a child so small, someone he suddenly felt a little responsible for. He missed Toothless - desperately, but this kid, these slaves, it made him sick and he . . . Astrid would say drop it, he had enough of the impossible to do already, he had to find Toothless and then get back and help his father.

He moved slowly, knelt down in the dirt. The child looked at him, perked his eyes and popped down to the ground, his face pressed into the wooden bars, staring at Hiccup. "What is it with people and

sitting on the ground? Everybody does it with me." He grinned again. Hiccup tried to offer one back. "You, uh, have a name?"

"_Every_body has a name." He rolled his eyes.

"Yeah, that's true, I mean . . . what's _your_ name?" Hiccup smiled, looked down at the kid, tried to see suddenly if he was - all right, if he was in good health. He knew bad things happened to slaves, that they weren't treated like citizens, or even _human_. And with this mere child The thought scared him, honestly.

"Weeeeeell, since you're asking." The kid slid lower down the ground, peeked up at Hiccup from behind his oily frock of hair. "The name's Iggy. I'd call you pegleg, but I got someone already named that over in the flock of folks yonder. So what can I call ya? I got perfect memory." He tapped the wooden bar, humming something brokenly.

Hiccup shrugged. He wasn't exactly home at the moment, and as much as he wanted to be frank with this child, this kid named Iggy . . . But how could a little kid do any harm? Who would ask _him_ for the whereabouts of one murdered heir?

He swallowed. "I'm Hiccup," he whispered, cautiously reaching out and tapping the boy's little hand.

"Oh." Iggy stared down at his hand, smiled and patted it back. He frowned up at him suddenly. "Gee, _those_ are bad. I heard that means you're a runt of some sort. Whatcha do? Rob somebody?" Iggy blinked at him, lips pursed.

Hiccup smiled. "No, no it's something else. It's . . ." He thought back, the way he parted from Dad, that revelation, the fact that he'd gotten that name because he was truly unwanted, _unloved_. "It's a long story, Iggy."

"I get that a lot." He rolled his eyes, tapped his head suddenly. "People think I'm a little kid, you know a little, _tiny_ kid. But!" He sighed. "If you won't tell that, at least you can tell me . . . how'd you get your leg busted?" He leered at the metal appendage, in a mock revulsion.

"Oh this?" Hiccup bent his foot around, sat under his crossed legs. He didn't really talk about it much, everybody knew what happened, and whenever it had to be discussed, his Dad always had the pleasure of bragging over his son's heroics. And they always got into some mock spat over how much credit Toothless got in the great battle.

"You're smiling!"

Hiccup snapped out of his thought. "Huh?"

"I caught you smiling. Could you do more of that? You look like a pretty gloomy person." His eyes clouded with disapproval. He smiled and started humming, tracing his finger in the ground.

Hiccup crossed his brows, let out a small, pensive grin. It was a strange feeling, to smile again. What had this thing done to him? He was always the positive person, the guy who believed things were

doable when chances seemed otherwise. He took risks, took chances, and came out successful - at least some of the time, as Gobber might contend. And now, despite the fact that he might have messed up, might not have done things in the cleanest way, he couldn't give up now. And this little kid - _look at him_. Trapped in a life that he didn't deserve, and _he_ was smiling, _he_ was telling someone else to keep his chin up.

He turned his head slightly, looked down at the dirt where Iggy was drawing. "What's that?" he said, pleasantly.

"Dragon," the boy sighed, boredom in his lilting voice.

"There's been a lot of those going around here," Hiccup hummed, pulling his legs in closer.

"Did a dragon bite off your leg?" The boy peeked at him, his muddy finger paused over the smudgy drawing.

Hiccup shook his head. He didn't really know how it happened - no one knew. Except Toothless. He'd looked at the stump of his leg before, wondered if it was Toothless who mangled it beyond repair. His mouth dried and he flicked his hand off his leg, suddenly realizing it was resting there. "Iggy, I need to ask you something."

"Finally!" The boy swung over, smudged out his drawing in the dirt and looked at Hiccup, mouth agape and eyes alive.

How are you so happy? Hiccup almost asked, smiling just to see the kid act like this. "I'm looking for a dragon, a _really_ black dragon." Hiccup leaned closer to him, a hum of anticipation and excitement in his voice. He traced in the dirt the shape of Toothless, bit his lip as he finished it, saw the subtle shape in the brown moist earth.

Iggy contorted his torso, awed at the drawing. "Oooh."

"You've seen it?"

"Nope."

Hiccup sighed. Well, it was-

"No, _wait_, I have. That's a, a- it had a name. I heard it. But I only heard it once." Iggy scrunched his eyes. "I need to hear something like two times to really remember it. Then I can use my perfect memory." He hummed and popped his lips. "Ah, gee."

Hiccup laughed, a laugh that came out like relief. "Maybe Night Fury rings a bell?"

Iggy raised a finger. "That's _it!_"

Hiccup heaved a breath, leaned close to the boy. "Where'd they bring this dragon?"

"Over at the mountain thing." Iggy pointed, his finger wagging over towards the Great Hall of the Skirra VÃ©llites. Hiccup squinted, could see the lights edging the structure afar, the shape of the Hall. "They took him . . . inside?"

"Yeah, they say there's a ginormous cage thing in there and they kill dragons."

Hiccup squinted his eyes and looked at Iggy. The kid said it so lightly, that horrific fact. Iggy was nodding, open-eyed at the distance. It was time to go into action.

Though he hated to leave this child. He didn't want anything to happen to him. If he got Toothless out, then what? Did his father know what slaves were kept here? Would it be possible to _do_ something about this?

:: ::

War. It was hard, it was tough, and it was necessary. It was the only way.

Heather flinched as she put a hand to her father's face.

"Get away from me-" the old man panted, slapped her hand away.

Battle did that to him, but not every battle. Just the ones he was losing. She gritted her teeth, took the moist cloth up in her hand and stepped away from the bed he was resting on. Shafts of shadows dug around him as she rose, warm light slicing through in daggers around him, from the candles in the other side of the room and on the bed stand. She backed away, the light changing, the glow hitting his face and the wrinkles that plagued his cheeks and eyes. She knew he was weak, knew that he wasn't the same strong warrior he still believed he was. . . .

And this?

Another attack of the mind. She slapped the wet cloth into the bucket on the floor, didn't react when the water splashed up and soaked her boots and legs. If her father really believed what he was saying, that they were winning this thing - he wouldn't be this way right now. Battle always cleared his mind, opened his airways in a way that nothing else did - took his mind off the losses in his life, the pain of Valla, and the torture of his brother. But she'd killed Hiccup, didn't that mean anything, changed anything, released him from at least _some_ of his pain?

She looked down at her hands suddenly, rolled them over in the orange glow.

It would take a while, and maybe it was his brother he wanted most of all. She bent down and collected the wet cloth from the bucket again, squeezed it out tightly and listened to the liquid clap, suck, and clap into the water again.

"Heather-" The voice was soft, cracked. She turned, brought a hand up instinctively to push her hair away, the water dripping down her arm and cool, almost cold on her face. "Dad," she said, quietly.

He groaned, and in the darkness she could feel him try to lean up on the cushions, and having a hard time of it. She walked slowly to his side, observed him for a moment. He was frail right now, just like

every time he had one of his attacks - which was why this room had no windows, had the door bolted.

She leaned down and touched his arm, testing for something, some sign that this was over for today. There was a war, not to mention the dragon raid they had to get back to. And the injured Night Fury. With the dragon raid and his sudden mental attack, she had neglected checking on the dragon all day. An unwise neglect to leave that dragon wounded and uncared for. Toothless needed to be in top condition. She felt her hand tense, almost came out and said "I need to go now," but she looked at her father's eyes, that weary exhaustion. . . . She knew of course she was the only person even remotely capable of healing him in this time of terrors.

She bent down and ran her fingers across his moist, sweaty arm. "We'll win against him, don't worry," she whispered, her voice suddenly dry. She cleared her throat, wiped her mouth and breathed out a weak smile.

He considered her briefly, the stare almost blank. He blinked slowly, and she patted his arm. That was the beginning of the return - that detachment he had now. It was ending. She rose gently, walked to the door and slipped off the bolt. "How are you feeling?" She didn't turn around, felt him pause and mull over the question.

"Heather?"

She edged her head backwards, caught the golden glint of candlelight in the corner of her eye, his dark shape slowly rising, fumbling with the covers on the bed. He cleared his throat gruffly, muttered something she couldn't hear. A small smile flickered on his lips. He was coming to, she was sure of it now.

At least in the mind. His body was still weak. An easy rhythm of breathing broke from the darkness over the bed, the covered form now quiet. His head lay still and fallen to the side, the tired, strong hands settling on either side of the pain-numbed body. Sleep sometimes was good to him.

She had to take care of the war for him, assure him that all preparations continued as planned, especially the dragon training. He still didn't want it, she could feel that. But things had to change. The Hooligans - for all the traitors that they were - they may have stumbled upon the right idea. And even if they didn't, they had to fight the war on their terms, dragons against dragons. She wasn't stupid enough to think that pushing the same old strategy was going to work, not with the losses at Berk already. In war, there are often no second chances, and even less chances for using the enemy's best weapons for your own.

And in this case she did possess the most formidable weapon of Berk. Legend had long since praised the power of the Night Fury. The kind that leveled armies and incinerated fleets in one blast, that struck without missing and killed unseen. Vikings down the ages had feared him above all other dragons. With such a beast trained, he could be the deciding factor in the final defeat of that cursed tribe.

It only needed to be trained, only needed to find a connection in her the way he'd found a connection with his previous rider. But the most important fact remained, that the Night Fury was hers. All other

factors could be adjusted around that.

23. Chapter 20: Reunited

a/n: Sorry for the two-week intervals, people! XD We both have college work upon us and I want to give you guys a good story. Thanks for understanding!

View the illustration at the official webpage. Put a period where the dashes are: [howtotrainyourdragon2 - thecomicseries - com](http://howtotrainyourdragon2-thecomicseries-com)
>or at my deviantArt gallery: [inhonoredglory - deviantart - gallery - 38855965](http://inhonoredglory-deviantart-gallery-38855965)<p>

* * *

><p>How to Train Your Dragon II
>The Dragon Whisperer

**Act II
>A World Shattered
**

**Chapter 20
>Reunited

The way he talked when she finally caught up with him, that tenderness in Hiccup's voice. She could tell this stranger boy meant something to him, even if it was just sympathy on overdrive. Hiccup was that kind of person, a caring heart. She loved that about him, but now? Now they needed to focus. She turned to Hiccup, watched the bright moonlight shaft across his face and shadow his eyes in darkness. "We can't afford another distraction, Hiccup," she said, quietly and firmly.

"Astrid, I just thought-"

"You can't help everyone, Hiccup."

She held her breath, saw the boy wince ever so slightly as they walked. Maybe he didn't deserve that snapping remark, but really - they had to leave the slave child behind. They already knew where Toothless was - and Toothless was the reason Hiccup was here. Why bring this issue to complicate already impossible matters?

She moved deftly besides him, the street widening and thronging with night life in the aftermath of the dragon raid. He strode ahead towards the great shadow of the Herkja Hall, his face fatally serious, filled with a depth that made her know his mind was still on the child.

As much as she hated to admit it, slavery was normal. Did it appeal to her sensibilities? Was it something she'd do? A revulsion throbbed up her throat, and she looked on ahead, at the people they called enemy here in their midst, the people who tried to destroy Berk, kill Hiccup. Maybe she wouldn't have a problem throwing some people into captivity.

She couldn't judge the practice. It was the prerogative of a conquering people, and Vikings were conquerers. But did that have anything to do with anything right now? Her foot suddenly crunched on

a shard of pottery, and she looked down at the random debris. It was glinting in the firelight that flickered orange around them. "Let's think about something else," she said out loud, touched his shoulder briefly and sought his eyes. He didn't meet hers, shoved his head forward. He was maybe just a little bit bitter now?

It didn't matter, so long as they got this thing over with. She angled her head away from him, to the warriors streaming ahead of them in the street. The stony looks and marching feet against the plaza floor, sounds from some new agitation within the Skirra VÃ©l. Hiccup was quiet now, intent on the surroundings. She squinted at him. How would he know what was eating her mind? He dragged her on this mission without her dragon or her axe, their own parents had no idea if they drowned in the high seas, and now the kids and their dragons vanished just as magically as Toothless had on Induction Day.

If Hiccup needed to worry about anybody, he could pick any of his friends.

She felt Fishlegs pushing into her from behind. She snapped a look at him, but his round face looked small, his lips pursed shut and his stare concentrated on the dragon cages to their right. Many Gronckles lumped together behind the bars, cramped atop each other like suffocated rocks. They all looked like Meatlug to her, but to Fishlegs, there wasn't any dragon like his Gronckle. She softened her gaze at him, brushed her hand gently against the soft skin of his arm. Fishlegs peeked at her for a moment, before that look plunged him again into a brooding silence.

She knew what Fishlegs was worried about. The same thing she was. Because Toothless wasn't the only friend missing on this island, and unlike Toothless, she had no idea where they disappeared.

A warrior pushed into her, almost knocked her down. "Excuse me!" she exclaimed and grimaced at him. His eyes snapped back on her, seared into hers. She sucked in a breath, thought maybe, maybe, he recognized her, but no. He wasn't one of the Skirra VÃ©llite Council. He marched onward, urgently onward, towards the Great Hall steps teeming with armored bodies pounding the stairs. She felt something determined in their step, something she knew before, felt back at Berk. She didn't like that feeling, that urgent impatience reeking out of that sudden rush of warriors towards the Hall.

"You okay Astrid?" It was Hiccup's voice, laced with concern, but she didn't look at him. These warriors converging at the Hall - no, leaving the Hall. Marching, ominous marching towards the dragon cages. Stern eyes and stern steps, taking their posts by the cages. The sheer rush of men, like some order had been given. She knew war enough to feel that. The warriors descended on the plaza below. The lead wave approached the street, intersecting the traffic of produce carts and random people walking who-knows-where at night. One warrior accosted a teen boy ahead of them herding sheep through the plaza. The guy took the shaking kid by the shoulders, spoke sharply as he examined the boy's face. He released the boy and bellowed to his fellow men marching in their direct path. Her heart sparked. Hiccup's eyes narrowed, his face turning away from the blinding moonlight, and she could feel his breathing halt with her own as the warrior's words shouted clear across the night.

"-I don't care if we haven't a scallop's eye of what they look like - they're spies - look for spies! Search every blasted corner of every house twice. Then drag them to the Great Hall."

:: ::

Ruffnut twitched her nose, squinted in the ridiculously dull light of the Skirra VÃ©llite Great Hall.

It wasn't everyday you got to sneak behind enemy lines. It wasn't everyday you got to infiltrate the darkest interior of the antagonist and see stuff even spies couldn't see. And it wasn't everyday you got a one-on-one with the big shots of the enemy.

She shrugged, the itchy ropes around her hands tight and stiff behind her back.

But then again it wasn't everyday you got captured either. . .

If only Snotlout wasn't there they might have gotten away with it, too. She leered at the third wheel in their group, the guy on the other side of Tuffnut, the three of them on a long bench in the corner of this cave. She rolled her eyes as she saw him go into the pouting phase of his prisoner behavior. He looked better in the angry phase, at least it gave a semblance of rebellion. This was just . . . embarrassing. "Snotlout, shut your trap," she called.

"What was that?" The captor above them stared down at her.

She snapped back to look at the face that was staring into hers. She felt Snotlout whimper something. She rolled her eyes. "Hey, big boy!" she shouted at their captor, and he snapped back at her, his fat eyes dark and thick with folds of charred, stained skin.

"Your ugly is showing," her brother lolled, the end of his voice lilting into a lisp which she could feel was coming from the pain of the wristbands. She looked over at him, saw the one big, silent warrior pulling taut the rope behind her brother.

The captor in front of them was not amused by their snarky remarks. He breathed heavily into her face and she leaned back, her nose smarting to the strong smell of rotten sweat. "Hey-" she slurred, "I hear bathing is in vogue. You should try it sometime."

He narrowed his eyes at her, those dark eyes glinting with purpose and determination. He laughed suddenly, still looking at her, a jolly sort of laughter thick with a strange density. He was weird, but she got the feeling she might even have liked the guy. He looked tough and probably was good with dragons if he ever got his fat behind in balance to ride on one. But now . . . looking at her like this . . .

I don't think so.

He breathed into her face again and she grimaced. "I got reports of you and your friends hiding in baskets. Now don't tell me that's not suspicious."

"Hey I was bored," Ruffnut snapped, flashing an encouraging grin to Tuffnut. "You need to upgrade your entertainment in this town." She

smirked.

"Yeah, get some dragons in this place. I mean . . ." Tuffnut scuffed up his eyes. "That didn't come out right, did it?"

Ruffnut raised a brow. Nope.

"Small talk will get you nowhere, little girl." The big man jangled suddenly, and she noticed a leather strap of hanging metal junk swinging from his belt. Of all the stupid jewelry. The tiny scraps looked like he picked them up from some blacksmith's dump. Haha, wasn't even some cool skull or something. What was wrong with this guy? This was seriously going to make her laugh. "Hey I'm not a little girl, just so you know-" She giggled.

He stomped his foot. "You are if I say so."

Oh poor baby. She frowned, looked up at him. He's getting pouty now. "Um, you hear that? It sounded like wings." She looked around and the man snapped his head up, wary suddenly. "That was the sound of logic flying out your pretty head." She laughed, jabbed her brother in the shin. He howled obnoxiously and sang out, "I think his brain went with it - watch out for falling debris."

She laughed, snorted. "Oh and don't forget-"

"No one teases ME." A heavy hand grabbed the back of her head suddenly, lunged her forward. She lisped a breath. "-and I don't need a baby telling me otherwise."

"Oh yeah? I don't see a baby anywhere right now . . ."

"Hey, get your hands off my sister-"

"Shut up." He was staring at her, those hard black eyes thick and threatening. She was almost tempted to let the thrill of fear in her heart come out. "Ha!" she laughed in his face, and that slight thing in her nerves dimmed, faded into excitement. This guy thought he was such a big shot. If only he was on Berk, he'd know he was dealing with something dangerous, the three of them. Or-

She looked at Snotlout, swore she saw tears in his eyes.

-or at least the two of them . . .

"I'll ask you once again - who, how many, and what do they look like?" The man tightened his grip around the back of her head. She lolled her eyes at him, tried to look bored, because in all honesty, that's what she was. Sarcasm was a lifesaver at a time like this. Who knows what would have happened if they just shut up or . . . acted like Snotlout. She'd just die.

"I asked a question, little girl."

"Oh you did? Sorry I was doing something more exciting - in my head. Like I said, boooooored . . ."

Tuffnut snickered proudly. "Yeah, I totally black out when I'm bored to death." She could feel a wariness in his voice, a slight hesitation. She'd have looked over, but the creep still had a hand

around her head, blocking her view. What was going on with Tuffnut? It almost sounded like . . . worry? For what?

She felt a nudge on her boot - her brother. She blinked, her eyes still locked to the angry man in front of her. Chill, Tuff, I'm okay . . . Did he really think she couldn't take care of herself?

"Come on, we told you everything!" It was Snotlout's voice, and he was still in the pouty mode. "Do we look like spies?"

Shut up, Snotlout . . . The idiot was going to give it all away. The hand let up on her head a little and she took the inch and jerked back out of his grip.

"Do we look stupid?" her brother said. Trying to cover up Snotlout's revealing remark.

"Stealing two wild dragons? You tell me." Their captor stepped back, looked at each of them.

Snotlout, don't go saying that they were our dragons. If he did that, then he'd win all the awards of stupid. But it was true - who'd have thought Belch, Barf, and Meatlug would be here? With a bunch of wild unruly dragons? In a cage, the poor things. It made her mad. These dimwits weren't going to see the end of it once she got out of here and got back on the dragon. They were asking for trouble. Which was just the way she liked it.

Suddenly something struck the air. Sharp, piercing. It filled the expanse of the Hall with a deep low sound punctuated by high-pitched yaps. A loud hum, an excited, happy, familiar hum coming from below, from inside the weird depression in the middle of the Great Hall.

Toothless?

"Hey, is it just me, or is there a dragon down there?" she blurted. The man glared at her in confusion and Tuffnut's face blanked, but the dragon hummed again in eager response to her voice. That wasn't a Zippleback. So that's where they hid him. Poor guy probably hadn't heard a familiar voice in ages-

"What are you trying to pull, girl?" The man's eyebrows bristled darkly, crudely hiding his eyes. He pushed his face close to hers, but the happy dragon yapping soured his attempts at intimidating her. She grinned slyly. He snorted into her face, then snapped away and shouted across the Hall.

"Shut up dragon!"

The dragon did not shut up. In fact, his excited sounds increased and melded into something more gravelly, a pointed hum close to a growl. Toothless got choice words for you, Mr. Ugly. The man looked almost silly half standing and half crouching, his gold bracelets jangling uncertainly at some dragon in a hole spitting insults at him.

"Dragon caught your tongue?" she snickered, and suddenly the man was glowering over her, his fist flying into her face. Dang that felt good. Except when her helmet went flying and she couldn't grab it

back. "That your best shot?" She laughed. This guy wasn't dealing with no baby. That was warm up with Tuff and her.

"Shut up." He threw his other fist at her, and she winced at the sudden tenderness in her eye. She heard something, it sounded like Snotlout. Maybe he was at the crying stage by now. And then Tuffnut, her brother, she could feel him moving next to her, sharp jabs of motion that she couldn't make out with the spinning going on in her head, saying something- "You pig. Only I hit her."

"You really think you can do something?"

"Get your hands off my sister."

"And what position are you in to say that?"

"I said get your hands off."

"Oh I will . . ."

Ruffnut blinked, got her eyesight in gear finally, mumbled a random insult she couldn't even articulate, and then- the tough hands on her hair again. Boy, this was so old. "Yeah, grab the girl," she sighed, and kicked the man's shins. That would teach him.

The hand got tighter, pulling at her scalp. It still wouldn't beat the time Tuff and her had played this game before. This was small potatoes. Still. She opened one eye, saw a sudden seriousness in Tuff's face. Which wasn't like him. At all. Tuff?

"Take your hands off." Her brother was fatal now, deadly serious.

Tuff, it's okay. Chill!

"Not until you tell me what you know." Something cold touched her neck suddenly, and she smirked. Going the violent route, eh? Don't give 'em zip, bro. She eyed him, nodding. He caught her drift, but she didn't get a return acknowledgement, not like the way she knew one, not with a smirking nod or a wink. He was still serious, and this meant trouble. Tuffnut, what's wrong with you?

:: ::

Hiccup held his breath, squinted in the firelights inside the Great Hall. He thought he heard something farther within, a growl or a hum. But the people were too loud. The fresh waves of humanity pulsed past him out the door he'd just entered. It hadn't been hard to get in here; the spies' identities were unknown, and the reports had instilled an alarm that distracted from the three teens slipping into the Hall. But just how did the Skirra VÃ©l find out? That disturbed him more than anything.

He sidestepped into the shadows behind a pillar. Astrid on his right moved with him, and Fishlegs did the same. More like a hollowed-out mountain than a building, the Hall inside reverberated with the bluster of men and women seated at tables, their axes and swords and bows laid by their sides, their heads hovering over their mugs in strained mutterings. A certain agitation in them, an alertness despite the dulling effects of the mead. The smell of alcohol was

heavy the air and stuck to his forehead. It shouldn't have bothered him, he'd felt it all his life, except now it mixed with the sweat filming his cheek and clamming up the insides of his clothes.

There was a sharpness in the air, he could feel it. The place was under high alert. He could hear snippets of it in conversations as they passed one Viking to the next. With reports of spies among the people, no doubt somebody from the higher echelons would arrive at headquarters to quiet the anxiety. It could be Heather, her Council, or the chief himself. Perhaps someone from the voyage to Berk, someone who could positively identify any Hooligans among them. It could mean trouble.

He had to act soon. Before he messed up again.

He edged outside the pillar's shadow, suddenly felt bare without that comforting darkness concealing his steps. He felt Astrid's presence move with him, her breathing audible near his right ear. The Hall swept beyond him, innumerable tables and chairs underneath the dome ceiling black and far above. Dragon heads adorned the walls everywhere, frozen in majesty, their open jaws screaming wrath above his head. A vast pair of Timberjack wings stretched high above him, the wingtips fastened among the pillars like a colossal bedsheet nailed to the sky.

Yet the most breathtaking sight wasn't the dragons. It was the center of the Hall. Where the majority of human festivities should be located, the floor dropped into a gulf of space. He couldn't see the bottom, only the near-vertical slopes of rock descending into the depths of the mountain. Webs of chain strung out across the crater's mouth, the spaces between the chains too wide to prevent a person from falling through. It had only one purpose. To keep a dragon captive for all to see.

So this was the dragon cage. More accurately, a dragon arena.

He eyed the people milling there, mugs in one hand and weapons in the other, strolling along the rim of the enclosure and peering inside. Some kind of . . . attraction. A spectacle.

Suddenly, a hum.

He stopped and blinked. Astrid halted and Fishlegs almost collided into him from behind.

A dragon, humming. A gentle lilting he hadn't heard for so long, a purring deep and low and unmistakable.

He stared at Astrid, opened his mouth.

Only a Night Fury made that kind of sound. Only Toothless.

A pulse beat through his heart, hard and urgent, a chill down his legs. Toothless. After all this time. After all that had happened, his friend - he had to see him. That desperate urge washed over him, made his heart happy, elated for a minute. Hiccup jolted away from Astrid, ran. Somebody's curt voice whispered a warning behind him. It was Astrid, but he didn't care right now. He knew what she was saying - be careful, watch out. He just wanted to see Toothless again.

The mess of bodies in front of him were blocking him, getting in his way. Carrying too many hammers and bows, axes and swords, for such a so-called peaceful gathering as a night of drinking in the Hall. He plunged into the suffocating masses, the arms and legs and metal mail and faces turning on him, surprised eyes and irritated voices. So many, too many. Get out of the way. He gritted his teeth. The dragon humming grew louder and pointed and laced with a thrill of excitement. The hum throbbed into him, pierced through the noise of everything. The yearning quiver in that dragon throat, the rhythm of expectation so near, so close. His heart fluttered. Toothless knew he was here.

But there was something else in that hum. The rasp, that pensive break in the purr, like the dragon's throat choked. He could feel Toothless straining, struggling, his cries sparking loud and wheezing tightly. Something was wrong.

Hold on, bud.

He squeezed through a sliver in the wall of Vikings, heard chiding grunts as he pressed past the last set of elbows. His left shoulder twisted and he hissed. His hand flew up to his wound and he pressed it hard through the clothing, through his coat and his flying harness hidden underneath. Why did that have to hurt right now? He heaved a breath, willed his mind to shut it out. The thick smell of mead sickened his mouth suddenly. He shoved forward, broke through the line, and stumbled into the open. Suddenly no people in front of him, only yawning space and interlocking chains spreading out below him like nets floating in a sea of air. He shoved his hands ahead of him, tried to catch his balance as his feet edged the lip of the sudden precipice plunging before him, the smooth cavern rock slipping down, down into the far, flat, dark and boundless floor below. An arena floor.

And Toothless on the opposite side. But-

He gasped.

What happened to you?

Froth discolored Toothless' mouth and dripped from jaws muzzled too tightly. The dragon struck away from the wall like a mad animal, the rope tethering him and pinching tight his neck. A crack split down his shoulder, the flesh bright and raw, and dark red tainted his black skin and pooled under his feet. Fresh blood. It splattered his black flanks and wings, stained the floor deep and ugly.

Hiccup shut his eyes, his chest throbbing, his heart knotted, black and seething.

What have they done to you?

Excruciating pain shot into his shoulder suddenly. He clenched his jaw, bent over, his mind dizzying, numbing, repeating over and over. How could they?

He suddenly felt the presence of the people behind him, staring. He didn't have to look, could just feel them, hear their murmuring interest on the scene below. How can they watch this? Just watch. Emotion choked inside him, shoved up his throat and knocked him

breathless. He opened his eyes again, stared down at the Night Fury, suddenly felt like one of the spectators, dispassionately watching a dragon in a ring. Maybe they staged fights in here, humans versus dragons. Maybe it was a tradition, like their prize dragon hunts. Maybe-

Snap out of it. He couldn't conceive of any logic to explain the scene below. Sure, he should have seen this coming, knew these people had no qualms about killing dragons like Vikings throughout the ages. Yet - to see it with his own eyes, done to his best friend.

He focused on Toothless again, noticed his right front leg lifted above the floor with only the claws scraping the ground. Toothless shuffled in an awkward three-legged gait, avoided placing his full weight on that foot. The tear in his shoulder must be deep. He needed care immediately. Hiccup bit his lip.

Yet Toothless purred softly, seemingly naive to the severity of his condition. He flicked his tail and his eager eyes glanced up towards the ring of spectators lining the tops of the walls. He was watching them, searching them. Toothless was looking for him, he could tell.

Hiccup backed away from the arena's edge, just enough to hide himself from the dragon's sight. Something pricked inside him as Toothless muttered uncertainly for a moment, then hummed again with eager anticipation. As much as it pained him to say . . .

No, bud, not yet.

If Toothless saw him now, how would the dragon keep back his excitement? They'd been separated far too long - he himself could barely contain his feelings right now. It only took one happy call, a signal of recognition, and these people behind him might see it, might realize.

He had to get to Toothless unseen. And man, was that going to be easy. This ring was the absolute centerpiece of the Skirra VÃ©l Great Hall, and Toothless was the center of attention, even at this hour of the night. He wasn't even thinking how he'd get to Toothless way down there, and then get Toothless out of here. Could Toothless even walk with his injury?

He slapped a palm on his face, the sticky moisture scrunched into his eyes. He slipped his fingers up his forehead, through his hair damp with sweat and stress and the smell of mead. His vision suddenly caught a bob of blonde hair to his left. Astrid, staring into the arena. He almost doubled back, didn't know how long she stood besides him. Her eyes didn't bother to return his gaze. They furrowed deeply and roved with the movements of the dragon below. A mix of emotion on her face, the lips pinched tight and slightly colorless.

"Don't let him see you," he whispered through the side of his mouth, watching the Skirra VÃ©llites around him warily, their movement vague and thankfully ignorant of him and Astrid. He gave her a knowing look, saw a flash of understanding between them. For a moment he was surprised. But it wasn't a time to question her trust now, if it was a trust he could count on beyond this. She fell back with him, milling into the wall of people, and stepped close besides him.

"The saddle," she said softly, still searching below.

The saddle. He almost glanced back over the ledge, but he didn't need to confirm what he already knew. There was no saddle, stirrups, or rigging. Only the prosthetic tail, but that wasn't much good without the rest. Heather must have needed the stuff to fly Toothless. What, did she take it all off and - got rid of it?

He felt her hand touch his arm. She turned to him, her one unhidden eye very wide on him. Shafts of darkness screened her face and made it difficult to discern her thoughts. But her fingers squeezing his arm gently, said something, felt something he felt. After all, her own dragon was wounded. That must have hurt her just as much as he hurt now. Maybe it cleared her head a bit, made her see things new again. Like him and what he was trying to do.

She glanced down, her fingers still touching his arm, then turned up again. Hard lines and sudden urgency. "Hiccup," she whispered, almost unheard in the murmur of the crowd and her wary eyes on them. "I know you don't need any more problems right now, but - " she edged her body close, gritted the words so quiet and pointed. "I saw the kids."

He opened his eyes at her, moved his head ever so slightly. She responded.

"They got escorted out of the Hall just now. Under guard."

His mouth dried. He shook his head, but her eyes nodded. He turned and stared into the great depression, stared at the lower half of the arena walls lined by several heavy doors. He feared this. All the time he tried finding them, knew they'd get to town on some foolhardy notion of their own. "Where's Fishlegs?"

"Trailing them. I had to find you first." The tone of her voice, the grating irritation within the concern. He nodded, still searching the lattice of chains below and before him, how widely spaced they spread over the pit's ceiling. They caused the panic about spies, didn't they? Somebody, Snotlout or Tuffnut or even Ruffnut, doing something stupid and then getting caught. That would be just like them.

He stooped down and reached his hand over the air, grasped one of the hanging chains bolted into the ledge he stood on. He did, after all, bring them here. If he had come here alone, he risked only one life. He knew what these people were capable of, he knew what he was getting them mixed up in.

He gambled with their lives.

And now, the Skirra VÃ©l caught their spies.

He edged forward to the ledge carefully, made sure Toothless did not see him. He scanned the rough sloping surface of the rock that dropped away into the distant pit below. It wasn't perfectly vertical. So . . . it might work. He felt Astrid stoop beside him, felt her mind working. Prodding him. "The Skirra VÃ©l can do anything to the kids," she said slowly, deliberately.

He looked at her, a bit incredulously. I know that, Astrid.

"They might not have much time."

"What are you saying Astrid?"

He watched her eyes, the uncertain glimmer in them. Uncertainty. That was something strange. She lifted her head, choosing her words. "Are you saving Toothless first?"

He didn't look at her. So that's it. He didn't think it was a choice. Whatever next step he took, he'd need Toothless. "I can't leave Toothless."

"You can't leave the kids."

"Who said I'm leaving them? There's three of us." He felt her pause breath, let the implications sink in. He kept looking past the chains, kept calculating an idea in his mind. It could work, if he had a distraction to help him. A big distraction.

Her voice broke in, as sharp and critical as a whisper could be. "So I go get the kids, and what - you bust Toothless out by yourself? That's your plan?" The tone of incredulity in her voice didn't surprise him. He wasn't sure about it himself. But, now that he'd seen exactly where Toothless was, the exact obstacles in his way and the way to bypass them, he couldn't stop now.

"I can't help anyone without Toothless," he said, more firmly, more in his mind than out loud. It was true. Whatever jam the kids were in, he'd need his dragon by his side. "Astrid, just - watch the kids, don't do anything yet. Just . . . wait for me," he voiced, hoped she'd heed it.

"I'm not letting you do this alone." Her voice rose, and he sensed a few random faces turn their way. Astrid's face hardened, her own eyes piercing with determination.

"We need to move. Now." Her slender hand slid her bangs slightly away from her face, but they stopped midway, left the hair to fall back and conceal her eyes. She was standing up, ready to move into the crowd.

He wasn't ready. She couldn't leave like this, leave without even hearing his full plan. He needed her.

He stood up and stepped into the crowd after her. "Astrid, listen to me," he barely breathed, afraid his thoughts could be heard before he even spoke the words. He could see the mouths around him murmuring, the curious glances their way. Or was it suspicion?

He forced himself to smile. She was almost walking too fast, but he reached and grasped her hand, winced as his left shoulder complained. The rigid way she half-turned to him, the keen awareness of the throng around them. He could feel the slickness of her palm. He neared his face to hers, saw her face backing away, the confusion in her eyes.

He neared his cheek to hers, spoke into her ear. "Just hear me out." He tried to look nonchalant. She nudged her face close to his, spat into his ear, "I bet I can come up with a better plan."

"You haven't even heard mine."

"I've heard enough."

"No." He grasped her elbow, pinched it tight and kept it there. A surprise on her face, the widened eyes at him. He wasn't hurting her? No - she was a tough girl. The piqued air of curiosity around him, the heavy moistness dripping down his neck and the agitation to get something done, anything done. He firmed his gaze at her, tried to muster as much authority while still looking up at her. The peril of the kids, of themselves, of Toothless down below - he knew what he had to do. She had to listen.

"Astrid, I need you in this. It won't work without you."

Her eyes quieted at his words, tolerated the moment he sucked in his breath. She was giving him a chance.

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The net of chains glinted just as sharply above him, the people muttered and stared like every night, and the rock walls rose just as high and coldly as before, but something new, something eager and happy and yearning sparked inside Toothless. He hummed again, pointedly this time, almost impatiently. He could feel it, that Hiccup was here.

He did hear a familiar voice, that slim girl, the troublemaking duo with her brother and always arguing. Such a silly girl, one he never took seriously, until today. If she was here, Hiccup couldn't be far behind.

Right under this very dome, above him in this very crowd. He'll see him again - he'll see him. He moaned loud and eagerly up at the arena ceiling and slapped his tail with vigor, didn't even care at the spray of blood hitting him from the pool below him. Hiccup always found him, always. Every time they got separated, Hiccup made things right again. He didn't know how the boy did it, but he'd never leave him for dead. If only he could see that boy now, jump on the kid and lick his face silly.

He huffed a breath, snorted suddenly. He raised his head again, scanned the myriad of faces lining the top of the ring. How many times he looked at these endless, gawking faces. When was Hiccup's face going to peer over the edge? Toothless clacked his jaws as sharply as possible underneath the mouth strap. He uttered a high-pitched yap followed by a deep, watery cooing, the rippling velvet sound echoing across the rough sloping surfaces above him. The sounds attracted few new stares from the audience above. He'd been doing it for so long. Humming, cooing, yapping, even growling. Hiccup must have heard him by now.

He lowered his head from the search above, stared back into the shimmering red pool lapping underneath him. The muzzle chains around his mouth clinked with his downward movement. He flicked his ear flap, only made the chain clink against the leather again. Such an irritating sound, even more irritating to have strapped all over your head. Hiccup could get it off him, right? He glanced to his right, eyed the tension of the rope fastening his collar to the wall. The rope, the muzzle, the collar, the wall. The people, ringing high

above him, watching him. He shifted his weight on his feet, winced at the slice of pain in his shoulder. Something crept inside him, dampened the elation he'd been feeling this night. Even with Hiccup, this might not be so easy.

Pow, pow - POW!

He jolted and roared.

Explosions, flashing light. Bursts of fire pulsed up the dome, the momentary heat flashing over him even from this distance.

It was above him.

The dome rumbled. Humans screaming. He leapt to the wall and planted his front claws on the stone, tried to scale it. The fire from his wound seared into him, but he didn't care. He craned his head up, tried to spy the cause of chaos above him. The orderly ring of spectators dissolved into a shouting mess of running men. Their boots thundered the floor above him. The curving surface of the dome throbbed with a new ambience of bright flickering light and the unmistakable smell of vicious burning just out of sight. He flared his nostrils. It wasn't dragon fire, but it was hot, and it moved fast. He lifted his ear flaps, his breathing quickening. The snapping sound of wood cracking in heat. He caught sight of a flicker of flame licking a banner's edge and consuming the fabric. The haunting glow lit up deeper parts of the dome, an areal projection of the fire's ravaging course.

The place was on fire.

He roared a moan into the fiery air. Hiccup had to get out of there.

"Toothless."

The voice, that gentle, calm, unmistakable voice. Toothless craned his head up towards it, his front feet still planted on the sloping stone. Directly above him, far yet so close, peering over the edge of the arena and backlit by brilliant fire, was that face.

That kid, that short, silly, awkward, wonderful kid.

Hiccup!

He practically bit his tongue yapping his name, his muzzle chains jangling happiness and his tail slapping every floor and wall surface in sight. He leapt up the wall, tried to reach just halfway to him, but the slippery surface slid him down on his haunches at the bottom. He snarled at himself, and the wound spiked him in pain for a moment. He called up to the boy stooping on the ledge, opened his eyes wide to get a good look. The same grin, the same thin little arms and legs bunching under him and the eyes full of love. Toothless hummed deeply, yet narrowed his eyes. There was something a bit off in the way the boy moved. Just . . . something.

"Toothless just - calm down." Hiccup almost laughed. The wide brimming smile - the radiance. A radiance that he realized he missed so much. Hiccup waved at him, and Toothless leveled off, held his breath as Hiccup started doing something funny with his legs. Bending

over, sliding his body through the ceiling chains, grabbing a chain, and putting his legs over the edge-

Hey, wait a minute-

"Catch me."

Hiccup let go.

He was sliding down the wall straight for him.

Toothless squealed and moved fast. He stood almost vertically, his front claws scratching for the tiniest traction on the wall. He planted his head squarely against the near-vertical surface. In a moment two small feet thudded against his forehead, a soft leathery one and that sharp metal counterpart. He grunted at the push of momentum as the little feet shifted weight and moved over. Knees pressed against his head, little hands grasped his ear flaps for support and little legs dangled over the side and blocked his eyesight. He yapped at the crazy, unbalancing bundle on top of his head. He wanted to see it, lick it, nuzzle it. Just feel him again. Safe and sound, the two of them, without the madness that had happened.

Suddenly he felt a face pressing into him, near the top of his head. A little nose between his ears, the wisp of hair softly brushing his scales, the small fingers clasping his skin. The body on top of him suddenly held still.

He held still.

He could feel the body throbbing something soft and deep. Silent, wordless, and wonderful. "I missed you too, bud."

He felt the fingers moving, the knees adjusting and legs shifting off his head. Toothless backed away from the wall and slid down, gritting his teeth at the necessary pain to do so. His claws splashed into the pool below. He felt the body stiffen on top of him. He hummed at the boy, tried to sound encouraging. Hiccup never did see him hurt like this before. A spark curled in his chest, made him grumble slightly. I'm okay. He yapped and lowered his head, let Hiccup slide off and touch the floor. He snapped his eyes up, saw the boy-

He jerked his head back suddenly.

He hadn't seen it well from afar atop the ledge, but now- The red eyes and strained face and - his arm. The way the left one cringed and stiffened when he moved his arm or lifted his fingers. Hiccup was in pain.

Toothless throatied something sharp, eyed the boy carefully. Hiccup grinned and patted his nose. The right hand reached for his leather muzzle. Toothless flicked the hand aside.

"Hey-"

He was confusing the boy, but he had to see- he feared something that had been playing in his mind wordlessly for a while. If these people were really at war, and war was something he knew too well, and if Hiccup was affected by it, the fact that he was the chief's son if

nothing else-

He snuck his snout into Hiccup's left arm, towards his shoulder. The boy yelped slightly and he almost backed off, but the smell. He flared his nostrils and breathed. He pressed his nose into the fur coat, could feel the scent through the strange bulkiness. Blood.

He knew it. They'd hurt him, too. He knew it wasn't an accident, this injury on his friend, he could feel an evil intent in it, and he growled, hissed, the anger piercing him. War with dragons he could understand, war among the many peoples he could understand, but war on this kind, gentle boy, this Viking he called friend - that he could not understand.

"Toothless-"

The sound of his name jolted him and he nuzzled up to the boy, closing his eyes. The boy's fingers jostled around the harness trapping him, slipping over the latches on the leather straps. A slight gasp escaped him as he reached the right side and the gash that was still fresh. "We're gonna get you better, bud," Hiccup's voice came quiet and determined, and his little hands moved faster over him, frantic, as the sounds above increased suddenly, the hum and noise threatening and fast.

"There's a boy down there."

Toothless shot his head up, and Hiccup's hand froze on his side. The high dome rang with the sharp murmur of people. Then an awful silence. The firelights died, the smoke thickly lingering, the sounds sharper and questioning, directed down at them. Several hands pointed, and suddenly the dome broke with splitting, ravenous shouting.

Toothless let out a vicious roar, hatred boiling out of him. He could fight now, he was free, and they wouldn't get away with it. But Hiccup's hand on his snout suddenly, the flashing eyes full of meaning and urgency.

"Later bud. We got to go. Now."

24. Chapter 21: The Escape

a/n: I finally got my mood back for the story! So now I can help my sister out more than I had for the last couple updates. I'm glad!

View the illustration at the official webpage. Put a period where the dashes are: [howtotrainyourdragon2 - thecomicseries - com](http://howtotrainyourdragon2-thecomicseries-com)
>or at my deviantArt gallery: [inhonoredglory - deviantart - gallery - 38855965](http://inhonoredglory-deviantart-gallery-38855965)<p>

* * *

><p>How to Train Your Dragon II
>The Dragon Whisperer

**Act II
>A World Shattered
**

****Chapter 21**
>The Escape

The night was clear, the ocean still and stretching limitless in the darkness. The full moon washed the waters in the brilliance of day, the cold light sharp and beautiful. Only the jagged shards broke the sea's clean surface, the slivers of wood black and scattered over the void of the deep. Stoick paced faster on the deck, faced starboard on the Drakkar.

The wreckage of one third of his fleet, destroyed by the cursed sea monster, lay sprawled across the ocean.

There had been no warning. Before he could call his men to order, walls of water rose above the sails and collided onto the deck. And in the madness, he was smashed against the mast, the wood splitting, ships overturning, and the eerie cries of dragons muffled in the crashing water. Fleeing, but not escaping. His men flattened on the deck, bracing for whatever fate this Great Dragon intended to inflict on the helpless army. A living, fire-breathing mountain shivering shards of water above him, its roar splitting his mind and its eye bloodshot with wrath. The green barnacled mass of head rising so close out of the waves, almost underneath the ships.

Yet the monster shuddered and groaned, the very deck vibrating with its roar, sucking the waters into its teeth-laced mouth. In a wild moment the mountain sunk under the sea, screaming at a wicked pitch that slammed his ears deaf. He thought the sound alone would suck the ships into its depths. His back held rigid against the mast, his eyes wide open searching for Valhalla, but the darkness didn't come.

The dragon never returned to finish them off. He watched for hours afterwards, the sun slipping below the horizon as his men regained their senses and rescued those thrown overboard. His ears were dead for hours, the deafening roar was that loud. He was deaf to the calls of returning dragons and even the cry of Thornado landing back on the ship, the dragon watching, waiting, like him. But the Great Dragon never came back. He thanked Odin for this mercy, yet . . .

The gods were displeased. He knew that much. They spared him this time, but the warning could not be more mortally clear.

He stopped pacing. The deck boards creaked as he paused, a certain mush in the sound, the ship gasping for air. The boards were waterlogged, and the night had fallen so fast and so cold, they never dried. A soft dripping sound to his left, muffled in the moist boards and almost covered in blackness. The sail dripped over the spot, its edges thick with water streaming down to the deck below. Its fabric was so white in the moonlight, so white and wet and sleek that it blinded him. He waved his hand over his face, tried to swat the light away.

If Hiccup was still alive, Fate had hidden the boy from him. Three days of empty sea, three days of sleeplessness, three days of beseeching the favor of Deity. So often he spoke without words, just mouthed the phrases because his lips tired of reliving the burning pain in his heart. Was it too much to ask, to bring back his only son?

Now, after that encounter, he knew the gods were saying no.

He didn't need to ask why.

He turned his face to portside, the sharp wind smacking his cheeks cold and threading through the braids of his beard. Sharp salt in that wind, a bite he usually relished, but not tonight. Stark silhouettes dotted the sea on the other side, ships clustered together, others alone, all their sails rolled up. He squinted, saw hurried shapes of men, his men, pumping oars in the water, the splashing strangely loud. The ships formed a broken circle, a formation he ordered just for the occasion. He suddenly felt his own ship moving under him, heard the clap of oars on either side, clapping and smacking the sea towards the circle's center. His warriors stood in the water of that center, balancing on broken shipboards and angling those boards with oars from the boats. They were creating a structure out of the wreckage, a formless mound floating among the pieces of Thor's wrath. Already, its center was rising up to deck level, the clusters of debris hammered in layers atop each other to form a craggy plateau of driftwood. The structure was almost solid now, firm enough to land on and carry out the ceremony.

He told himself it was necessary. The fathers had practiced this rite for hundreds of years, maybe thousands. Berk had few during his lifetime, but then Berk had been one of the lucky islands. It was only done for the bad times, times of extreme famine and war. Back in the ancient days, they sometimes used humans, but this age was different now, and he was an enlightened chief. The very thought repulsed him.

Maybe the gods would be pleased with a dragon instead.

The ship lurched, the hull thudding against the edge of the floating structure. Stoick caught his breath, suddenly realized the loud lapping of the water along the frame, that it was about the only sound he heard. Of course it was. He'd sent almost all the dragons away by now. He scanned the ships within the circle, the masts and decks bare of any wings or scaled heads. Even Thornado's wide flat body was strangely absent from occupying his Drakkar's floor. The decks contained only half the men, too. He'd sent half with the dragons, told them to fly not too far to sea and not too long. Just long enough for the moon to dip one-third its way back to the horizon. It couldn't take much time, not very much time at all, and it was wise to keep the dragons ignorant of . . . such human rituals.

Only one dragon remained. A Monstrous Nightmare, injured in the encounter when a ship overturned. It probably wouldn't make it. At least, that's what he told himself.

He noticed Gobber hobbling towards him, those bushy eyebrows covering his eyes more than usual. And the sarcastic mouth, a little less sarcastic, a little too quiet. The plank was already let down onto the island wreck, and the old veteran was pausing over the board, as if afraid the arrangement posed too rickety a risk for his bum leg. But he knew that wasn't his concern. Stoick turned away for a moment, bent down to a sea chest. The lock opened easily, and the weapons inside were clean and sharp enough. A hammer, a sword, and an axe. Obviously, not the hammer this time. He mused only a moment, deftly

reached for the axe handle, and eased upright. He walked forward, could sense the remainder of his men at the oars rise behind him and follow. He passed by Gobber, almost not looking, and began to walk down the plank.

"Yer know Stoick, you might want to give this sacrifice a bit more thought."

Stoick paused on the plank, his breath sharp in his throat. He didn't look at Gobber, only far out ahead beyond the ships, towards a certain horizon. That horizon he coveted to reach, the one Hiccup ran off for. He grasped tight the axe handle, tapped the wood end against his belt.

"Gobber, I've already thought this through." He held his breath, could feel his friend stepping the plank behind him.

"I know, the gods are a driving bunch. They require much. It's just--"

"It's not like we haven't done this before."

"Yes, yes."

"I've never done it rashly, always, only, during the most drastic circumstances."

"True, very true."

"And my boy is such a circumstance."

A silence behind him, a brooding silence unknown to Gobber's temperament. Stoick almost turned around, wanted to look his friend in the eye if it hadn't been for his precarious balance on this plank and thus the impracticality of such a move.

Gobber's voice lilted behind him again, somberly thoughtful. "I know this whole thing today, everything these days, looks hopeless. I'd shiver in my skivvies too if we really riled Thor in his heavens. . . ."

"But . . ." Stoick paused, waited for Gobber to finish his thought.

"Yer don't even know why the gods are angry."

"Do I need to know?" He squared his shoulders, waited for his friend's next words, words he knew were coming.

"You want to please Thor, but did ye think of Hiccup?"

"He's the reason Gobber - for all this--"

"And yer choice of offering . . .?" Gobber eyed him sarcastically, quietly.

"I'm not doing this to please him--"

"But yer doing it for him."

"Big difference."

Stoick heaved a breath, took a step down the plank. Gobber fell silent behind him, only the scraping of his peg leg on the wood as they walked down. As much as he hated to admit it, Gobber was right. The moment this idea came to him, he couldn't stop thinking about Hiccup. No matter what angle he took it, Hiccup wouldn't understand. How could he? He wasn't sure himself. If this had happened two years ago, things would be different. No one would question it. It was tradition, it was the Viking way. It still was.

Tonight won't change anything.

His boot bottomed into water on the first step on the platform. The broken boards were only loosely fastened together, not really meant for walking over, since they wouldn't last the night anyway. He had to jump a couple steps, almost tiptoeing to the next pile of boards before his weight sunk his ankles in seawater. He grunted, hurried his step until his feet planted on the more solid portion of the structure. He felt the squish and grunts of his men behind him, encountering the same obstacle course.

He looked up, suddenly lurching, a bit unsteady, probably from the unstable footing. The small ritual fires were already lit along the edges of the jagged driftwood island, and in the center, at the very peak of the plateau, was the dragon. The blood-red Monstrous Nightmare, lying on its side, its body so long half its tail dipped into the water and its head curled back to prevent it from submerging in the sea on the other side. It lay perfectly still, breathing visibly, its side rising and falling in rhythm. He could tell it was asleep, must be sleeping soundly after they fed it a couple barrels of mead to ease its pain from the broken wings. After they saved it from underneath that shipwreck, he knew from one look it couldn't fly again. And what kind of life could a dragon have anyway, if it couldn't fly?

The last thought suddenly spiked his heart. The bitter irony. He firmed his mouth, refused to think about it. He lifted himself over the broken, jutting pieces before him, climbing upward. The crackle of the torches near him, drowning even the sound of lapping water. Not even the hum of conversation behind him, though he knew from the sucking footsteps that his men were close behind. Many of them had their own dragons. He had his own dragon. The breathless feeling in the air, so thick as he laid his foot down, like he was stepping backwards.

He stood on top of the edifice now, the warm glow of firelight flickering its way over the boards and bathing bright the breathing body before him. It was beautiful really, the hot firelight against the backdrop of cold, dark sea. The light shimmered on the orange webbing of its wings, the glint reflecting off its scales and closed eyes. The small grunts it made, he thought it might be waking, but no, its chest still rose and fell deeply and its eyes never opened, still locked in sleep. It couldn't feel anything.

He edged closer, stood over its neck, suddenly pinched tight the axe in his hand. A shiver rushed through him, cold and uncomfortable, as he stood there. The image of the dragon lying there, just lying still, only breathing, not even aware of him in its dreamless state of sleep. Suddenly what Hiccup said rushed over him, the story his

boy told two years ago after all secrets were revealed. The beginning of the story, the part about the downed dragon in the woods. He heard his boy say it, but now, tonight he knew what he meant.

Stoick shut his eyes, felt his fists tighten and his chest heave with something deep inside.

It had been two years after all. They weren't nameless anymore. They lived with them, protected them, shared their lives with them. He couldn't pretend this was his enemy.

Hiccup.

The name hovered like a curse in his mind, a reprimand against this very act dedicated to his son's life. Everything Hiccup fought for, everything the boy tried proving a hundred times to him, he knew he was breaking it.

He glanced up to heaven, the darkness there despite the moon. The cold stare of the stars, that brittle stare of the host of heaven. The whole dome held its breath, a cold breath touching him, watching him. Waiting for him.

He watched back into the endless sky. They'd been waiting a long time for this. He thought Deity had forgotten, that the years had washed this under the sea of time. That time twenty years ago, his Induction Day, his deception to win Valla's hand, and his brother's rage and banishment. But even more than that, it was the year after Induction. The love of both their lives, dying. Dying for a runt of a baby, a baby he should have left in the cold and rain, if he wanted her to live.

He could see that face, his own flesh and blood, when Rune came back, returned to Berk despite the sentence of exile. Returned for her. His brother was broken - he was broken. Almost broken enough. But when he heard about Valla, about the child responsible for it all, his mind went mad. The wrath, the choking pain, in that face as he stormed out of the house. Stoick almost summoned the Council to contain his brother, but Rune was already at the docks, setting sail, resuming his own exile. He screamed hatred over the water, hurled black oaths against the child born of deceit. He swore the curse on all the gods in the heavens and earth. Witnesses to that day, witnesses to a vengeance sure to come to pass.

He never thought the gods would honor that curse. But maybe, he was wrong. Maybe, this wasn't as simple as winning a war, or finding a missing boy at sea. If they honored his brother's wild outburst twenty years ago, maybe they'd heed this action now, and reverse Fate.

He was sure of one thing. He'd sacrifice anything to free his son from the penalty of his past.

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When you're trapped in a cage under the watchful eyes of your enemy, with suspicion running fast in their minds, and one chance to get away . . . time is a commodity you must use very wisely.

"Toothless-" Hiccup gasped. The dragon growled, eyes darting from him to the audience above.

"Let's get out of here, okay bud?" His voice was muddled and lost in the growing confusion, the cacophony of voices echoing into the chamber in which they'd trapped Toothless. There must have been something forbidden about touching the prize dragon, or the Night Fury - either way, he felt a sense of shock in the crowd from him being where he was. Any minute now, he and Toothless would lose their precious moments to escape. Astrid's distraction was a help, but how long would an alcohol fire last? How many barrels of mead did she find up there?

Hiccup ignored the people above, breathed in and coughed in the smoke that was filling the air. The fire was growing, sure, but so was the fact of his presence. He could hear the popping spark of catching fire, smell the waft of burning liquor and now fabric. Toothless nudged his head at him, limped forward once, a waver in his expression, a shake in the formidable gaze of his green eyes. It was the injury, Hiccup knew, that was making Toothless smart. He lay a reassuring hand on the dragon, ran alongside him as they raced to the edge of the wall. If anyone knew what it felt like to be stabbed, he could certainly qualify. It must have been recent, too, or Toothless would not have minded so much. But Toothless was stronger, stronger than he was, and this thing done upon him by evil, evil hands would be no match for his will.

There were too many doors in this place, those large stone gates with levers and pulleys on them, and across from him, at the center of the rows, a grated metal panel. It was just like Berk, with the hinges on top, and the poles that would keep the thing open and the notches in the ground where the poles could be levered against. If he could just get the door open-

Toothless was there already, clawing at the grate, hissing, growling at it. Hiccup waved him off, got his fingers under the lower rows of metal, shouted for Toothless to get his teeth under the base of the panel, once he got it up- up finally. Man, the thing was heavy, and his stabbed arm was hurting now with the pressure and Toothless - he could see the fire in his eyes, that despite the fresh stain of blood on the dragon's side and shoulder, he was too mad to complain.

And then the voices above . . .

"The madman- hey!"

"Get that boy!"

:: ::

It was strange, to see that face in her mind. Not much, just a flash. A horrid, horrifying flash of his scared, desperate face. She closed her eyes outside the door of Rune's room, focused on the idea that she was going to check up on Toothless. That's what she was going to do, of course. Check on that dragon which almost killed her, which she saved from the tradition of the hunt, that was probably still the only hope and proof that training dragons wasn't just an outlandish, traitorous idea.

But Hiccup's face-

Was her father's illness getting now to her? The delusions. Was that how this worked?

Heather exhaled, squinted in the moonlight, let the faint glow of the town drift into her eyes. Orange fires, blue-white light from above, blackness and dark shadows, and a hum she had missed, the hum of a town alive and with a purpose. She'd been away from this all for months staking out the Hooligans at sea, those months, those years she and her father had dedicated to revenge. It was a just thing they'd done, a just thing she'd done. She murdered for her father. The word in her mouth suddenly tasted awful, as if it were something she should regret. Something in her gut. But- No.

She had a purpose in it, no matter how hard it was, she'd done it for Rune . . . and for herself. She wanted her father back, that's the only thing she wanted. Surely anyone would understand.

"Heather?"

Anyone would understand . . .

"Heather, master?"

She whirled at the voice, blinked in the darkness. Why was she making excuses suddenly? "The boy's dead and gone, Hervi," she said mechanically.

The slave stepped closer to her, put a hand out. She could make it out vaguely in the black. "Heather?" He clearly didn't understand what was going on right now.

"I'm sorry. What is it you want?" She focused on him, heard a scream somewhere. Dragon screams. It made her wince suddenly.

"The saddle, master, for the dragon." He held up the battered leather saddle she'd seen on the Night Fury before, the one with the strings and straps on it, a million complicated pieces so thoughtfully put together. She stared at the saddle suddenly, ran a timid hand on it. No one in her village was like that, could make that. She ruled over an army of brutes, mindless except for the concept of war and killing and slavery. Humph. A small smile played on her lips. All except her father. Her father could do that. He was an artist, a craftsman, and the delicate etchings and smithing he'd done could fill a home with the warm coziness of creation. And yet- he never had a home. Not the one he'd wanted. Not even with her. Fate had taken his mind, given it to the runt of a boy that destroyed him. The leather was cold on her fingertips, and she drew her hand from it suddenly, looked up at Hervi.

"You are all right?" Hervi's voice was tactfully quiet and submissive.

"Of course I am." Lying was easy for her.

She turned, avoided his searching, caring eyes and gestured for him to follow. The crunch of gravel and dirt on her shoes was loud in her ears, tangible and distinct from the buzz of the townsfolk and the clap of metal on metal from warriors somewhere, everywhere.

"The spies were captured." Hervi's voice came clear and quiet behind her. She pressed on, listened, readied her mind for the information.

"They're just kids. The three of them. They're questioning them now, in the Hall."

Kids . . . ? That didn't sound right. "And the ship? They're the ones who took it here?" It was only one small ship, hardly proper for a massive army, and this espionage trick - it didn't feel official. This only proved it. Children weren't sent to spy on the enemy. Or was Stoick that desperate? Of course not; he didn't strike her as such. Though using that ship she caught Hiccup on that morning eons ago. . . . It gave a strange sense of *deja vu*, and a feeling that irritated her inside. They'd confiscated the little metal boat by now, was picking it apart in the great blacksmithing shop her father had created when he was first banished, many years before. Maybe they could find another secret in it. It did appear that this Hiccup was useful in creating mechanical wonders. She turned around, eyed the saddle again. For to create something like that, he surely must have invested some time in weaponry, shipbuilding, and other crafts of war. Those blueprints in his room weren't there for doodling. Like in dragon training, he had a skill.

And yet to see that ship again, and the fact that she had been on its deck once, in the early morning, with a kid whose life she took with her own hand - maybe that's why the visions were hitting her now, those momentary glances, momentary screaming in her mind.

"Hervi, would you go on ahead into the Hall?" She paused in her fast pace, took the saddle from him. "I'll take it." She nodded to him and he nudged his head back, gently, a slight confusion in his face, but still a detached respect. Thoughts behind those knowing eyes that she didn't want to ask about at the moment. "Go on ahead," she repeated and watched him pass her, disappear into the thick river of her tribesmen, torches in hand and a flicker of red and yellow light on their faces. They nodded in respect to her, but she didn't respond, carried the leather bundle under her arm and put her right hand out to let them know to let her pass. She had to get through to this dragon. She wanted to. Not for the mere fact that it would help with the training program, though that it would. But for the fact that she might find that same connection she'd felt with him that moment in the rockslide at Dragon Island. That spark of familiarity she had felt with no one but the man who was losing his mind. It was stupid to think that a dragon might make her feel that way, but maybe Hiccup wasn't all that wrong when it came to connections with those beasts? She'd started this training idea on the foundations of that boy's idea . . . so why not test the heart of it?

She reached the enclosure at last, the towering rock structure of their central Hall. Warriors around glanced at her, let her through, hummed warnings and data about the spies. She waved them off. If no one had anything definite to say, she wasn't going to hear it. She had her mind on Toothless now, and she wanted to try once more to get the dragon to make his peace with her. "Tell me when you have something more than rumors," she snapped and flicked her cape to her right, curled the fur around her wrist, lowered her eyes and snapped them forward. "Is the dragon still there?" she asked to no one in particular.

"Yes he is," said one.

And the expected concerned tone, from another. "Are you-"

"Yes I am," she cut it off quickly, flicked her eyes at the warrior who voiced the doubt. "The dragon will not kill me . . . because I learned from the best."

The flash of his face again, and was that scream real? She looked up. There were too many dragons in the vicinity, too many torches and people. It could have been anyone. "I learned how, how to deal with dragons, and this one is . . ." No, it wasn't him, she was not going to go crazy. Not like her father, she wasn't. She turned towards the cave entrance to the long, black tunnel that winded inside the ring that held their dragon games. "This one is different. Now if you will excuse me." She flicked away again, stepped into the entrance of the tunnel.

Glowing cave creatures hummed as she stepped past, lit up their yellow bodies and pulsed with her movement. She kicked one with her foot, watched it flicker and die in the path before her. There was a hum inside, a faint and timid scent of smoke, and an echo that made her sense that something was . . . wrong. The sound hissed louder and she could hear the crack and grate of the door to the arena being lifted from inside. There was a shuffle of silhouette behind the grating, indistinguishable, but the movements, she could tell were guilty. Who was there, and what did he think of doing with her dragon? A fire lit up inside her, and she pursed her lips, set her foot forward. Light slashed out from the opening, still many yards away from her distance. Something squeaked, yelped and an itching throb of insects and tiny reptiles slithered past her. She turned her head, caught a glance of a bright glowing thing rub up against her boot, drift past, its smooth scaled body sleek on the smooth rock shined by the traffic of a tribe.

And then she heard it - a dragon scream, a dragon's hateful roar.

:: ::

The smoke was getting thicker, the voices humming loud and angry now. They'd drawn their conclusions. He shouted again, got some power in his arm, ignored the screaming injury, lifted the gate up and over, felt Toothless nose it upward, throw it up and throat at Hiccup, nudging his head over his shoulder.

"I can't ride you, bud, you're hurt."

Toothless hissed, shook his head, lisped and showed his teeth.

"Bud, you can't carry me right now, I just-"

Toothless roared, lunged up to Hiccup, nosed him thickly and jawed the back of his collar. "Hey-" But Toothless was adamant and threw Hiccup up over his back. The boy jolted, grabbed for something to hold him in. With the saddle gone, there wasn't much except Toothless, and the ear flaps he slid his hands over. His shoulder was offended by the move and he locked his jaw, kept in the gasp of pain. So much for the numbing effect of excitement. Where was adrenaline when you needed it?

He got an ample shot of it soon enough. There was a shout behind him, an army of voices, mad and much too familiar. He'd heard it at dragon raids before at Berk, with Dad. As far back as when he was a baby. There was no mistaking the sound of war. They were jumping into the area, he could feel it. He whirled, scared suddenly. There were five screaming men gaining on them, a battlefield packed into their heavy, shouting voices. Hiccup leaned down. "Toothless, I think it's a good time to, uh, _go_."

The dragon roared, leaped out past the gate, the lever shaking and the smoke swirling around the door as it heaved down. Hiccup winced as he inhaled, wrapped his arm around the dragon's thick neck, the pulse of his gait heavy under him. It felt good to be riding again, to be with Toothless again. It'd been so long, much too long, that he'd felt the beautiful pang of familiarity. They were in the tunnel now, the outside wasn't too far away. In the rush of motion, he could see spots of creatures in the concaved black, cave creatures glowing yellow. He looked up, saw a figure cloaked in the dark shadows of the tunnel. It was-

Something sparked inside him, a- a shock. She was here, _she_ . . . His nerves sparked, a flashing pulse of emotion in him. His shoulder throbbed, maybe it was his heart beating faster now, or was that hot feeling anger? The last time they met it was dark like this, with faint light like this, and she - how could she do that? A weight fell into his heart, a sadness like the ocean, mixed with the white of fear and the red of anger. He couldn't comprehend it, the hum inside of him, but the sight of her, made him only want to get away.

"Heather-" he gasped.

Toothless almost paused, sensed the distraction in him. No, don't stop. "Toothless, step on it!" Hiccup shouted, his eyes locked on the thin figure whizzing past him, the white cape, the black tight clothing, the long black hair, and the eyes - those eyes that still bore into him but this time filled with a pure and honest surprise, and maybe - He turned around on Toothless' back - maybe even _fear_.

:: ::

She looked up, saw the gate swing up, opening, the light suddenly flooding the tunnel, orange and yellow - and smoke, the gasping puff of itching gray. She rushed forward, hit a pool of smoke. She coughed, kept her eyes squinted and looking forward at the sudden silhouette that blocked the light, the shape that was the dragon, the Night Fury. She could tell and she shouted, ran forward. "Toothless-" she called, and to the slumped figure on him, "What are you _doing?_"

She squinted, tried to catch sight of the man riding the rearing beast. Who would dare try to do things with Toothless without her call?

"Heather-" the rider gasped suddenly and she looked up. That voice- Her heart stopped.

"Toothless, step on it!" the boy shouted, the _boy_.

She couldn't even gasp the name - or, or _articulate_ the idea.

The whir passed her, the blackness and the smooth scales rushed by without a second's glance or care. She felt them, felt the leathery wings against her. She looked again, swore it was the boy's small frame riding the Night Fury. "Can't be." She ran towards the fleeing Fury.

Was it ghosts now? Spirits? The spirit of someone who wasn't, who couldn't be alive?

I'm not crazy.

But then why? Why was this happening?

:: ::

The darkness closed the girl in suddenly, as they raced out of the tunnel that jabbed into the wall of the Great Hall. They were outside now, the moonlight glittering on the torchlights that suddenly flickered in his eyes. There were people everywhere, warriors and women, even children in the crowd, the glimpses Hiccup caught of them. He could smell the strong thick ash in the air, burning fire and the massed scent of dragons, their screams sharp and clear in the air. It struck him again, those poor trapped creatures. But there wasn't time. Something was in front of him suddenly, a shield and a black shape behind it, flashing a hand. Hiccup yelled. Toothless growled and jolted to the left. Hiccup let out a yelp, grabbed Toothless's right ear flap, dug his metal foot into Toothless' good left shoulder. For support. _I hope I'm not hurting you_.

It was a madhouse outside, and who should blame them? It wasn't everyday a fugitive went racing through the town. Not to mention _two_ fugitives, a dragon being one of them. Hiccup squinted, tried to get his eyes adjusted to the flickering kaleidoscope of light. "We're good, buddy, just keep running, we're going to make it." The village was coming alive. War probably came easy to this kind of crowd, so he was sure they'd be wanted dead or alive. Mostly dead, probably. If one fugitive was slated for it and the other was dead to them anyway. Hiccup looked on ahead, the lightless valley of the forest marking the outskirts of the town, and the focus of their escape. He prayed Astrid would make it, that he'd find her there at the meeting spot, that bend in the river. He looked back at their pursuers. So long as they didn't have arrows or nets, they were good. He and Toothless had a nice head start and-

A black jab of an arrow came throbbing next to him suddenly, hit the ground and sputtered down the road.

Well so much for that.

:: ::

Out in the light of the torches and the darkness of the night, there he was again. The small frame, the connection with that dragon even she could feel from this distance and from this brief moment.

It was real. That was him, the heir, Hiccup. Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third, son of Stoick, child of Valhallarama, murderer of

minds and of dreams, holder of her father's sanity. He was _alive_. She didn't understand it, but he was still _alive_.

Her eyes narrowed, and the cold of the night eased away with the fire that pulsed in her heart. Maybe that's why her father still couldn't let go. The deed never had been done, and the gods would never heal him until the truth had been restored.

She was outside now, watching the scampering figures traipse and flee and limp through the town, very worthy of their Hooligan status. They wouldn't make it very far. This was _her_ island, and her one mission in life. "Get them!" she shouted, feeling the confusion suddenly around her. Warriors snapped to look at her, eyes alert and attentive. She nodded to them, cast a hand in the direction of the escaping dragon. "Don't hurt the dragon, whatever you do. And the rider-" She looked ahead, tried to find the figures in the growing darkness. "Bring him back alive."

:: ::

Hiccup shouted, "Right and left, buddy, shake it up. We're not making this easy for them." He yelled again, turned and looked back, kept his grip tighter on the dragon's neck as Toothless growled and veered to the right. Another arrow sped by him, landed ahead, and another, over his shoulder. One of these days they weren't going to miss. Hiccup leaned down on Toothless, his grip wavering as the dragon jumped back and forth. Someone on the street shouted. Hiccup could feel the breath of those people, like a pungent fog in his face, and the alarm that was going up around him. He bit his lip. Maybe he was pushing his luck this time?

But they were almost out. The sod house tops pooled in moonlight were getting sparse now, spaces of black between them, and the dragon cages, fewer. The arrows had stopped strangely. He peered back over his shoulder, winced as the movement woke up something in his shoulder again. Warriors were still careening at them, he could see their black mass coming at them like a wave of ocean at night. But they'd put down their bows. Why he didn't care to ask. Just get out of here and into those trees. He looked up ahead. So close. Toothless jolted again to the left, and Hiccup gripped the dragon's head closer, bounced and tightened his legs around Toothless' body. Talk about turbulence.

And then- a hideous yell behind him, shocked him for some reason, and a sloping plane of grass all black and streaked with blue-white highlight before them. Toothless careened down the hillside, his balance wavering, his movement uneven and forced. Hiccup leaned down, tried to see Toothless' injury, knew it was getting to him now, whether he would admit it or not. They had to find a hiding place, and they had to find it now.

The forest was black now, and the blackest spot - to the right, just across the glittering reflection of a stream, over by that rounded silver boulder. He leaned towards it on Toothless, mumbled into his dragon's ear, felt Toothless hum something, streak on faster, swifter, his injury seemingly nonexistent now. The sounds of their pursuers fading, throbbing with energy, but muffled by the speed and growing distance. Toothless was pushing it, Hiccup knew, but it wasn't for long. He looked back, his vision clear in the cold moonlight, the sharp silhouettes racing after them, down the slope,

their shapes losing themselves in the tall soft grass. He turned back ahead, felt Toothless give one more burst of power, leaping over the stream, his tail splashing into the water, darkness and shadow covering them, drops of cool liquid smattering his back and legs. Deeper, deeper into the branches and brambles they ran, shafts of blue light creating white verticals to the black pillars of ragged trees and long spiked grass. Over fallen branches and soft, sucking earth, a tear of thorn bushes, making Toothless yelp. "You all right, bud?" The dragon didn't care, pushed on, a race to nowhere, anywhere, deeper into the darkness.

When they finally stopped . . .

Quiet, a profound stillness. There was an opening to the sky, a ring of trees around them, a cliff's edge leading down into a thin trail of the river humming a sparked monotony that was the only sound in the darkness. Hiccup slid off Toothless' back, squinted into the darkness behind them, the spaces of light blue between the trees barely visible in the mingle of ferns and branches. "I think we made it," he said, quietly. For now anyway. Who knows how long, or how easy it was for them to comb the forest and find them. Hiccup turned around and lay a comforting hand on Toothless. The moonlight made his scales reflect a scattered white, sharp and beautiful in the blackness. Hiccup smiled. The dragon hummed, a happy lilt in his eye, as he slumped down crookedly, his right foot raised gently, and set down carefully on the ground. Hiccup knelt down to the injured leg. Toothless was hurt, and he needed the rest before they struck off for the meeting place. "Let's see what we can do here . . ." He squinted, tried to see the stain of maroon over the scales. Toothless hummed something and Hiccup looked up into the dragon's eyes. "What is it, bud?" Toothless blinked, those bright eyes clear in the night. He nudged his head forward, slowly, carefully, and touched Hiccup's forehead, his warm breath moist on Hiccup's bangs. The dragon moved his snout softly over Hiccup's hair, yapping gently.

It'd been far too long. Hiccup closed his eyes, brought his hand up and lay it under Toothless' jaw. He sighed, a calm, settled joy humming quietly in his heart. How did they end up in this mess? He opened his eyes. Toothless snorted suddenly, and Hiccup laughed, rubbed his palm over Toothless' nose. They'd get out of this jam, they always did.

There's nothing to fear, bud, I'm right beside you.

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The rest was good, if for nothing else than to calm his nerves. A Night Fury is not used to fleeing. And Toothless, least of all. He'd have stayed and fought the monsters, whatever they decided to do to him, but with Hiccup, he didn't want to take that chance. Escape was a better option. Anything to keep Hiccup out of harm.

He nuzzled his head into his feet, closed his eyes, let the cool breath of the night wrap him in a comfortable chill. So long as it didn't fall too cold too quickly, a dragon could easily love a hint of coolness. Toothless hummed, pleased, happy to be out from the bonds and the enclosure of that human cave.

There was a hum in the air suddenly, a scent he could recognize instantly. He was a dragon, after all, and his sense of smell was

still as keen as ever.

Timberjacks.

Somewhere, they were lingering. Somewhere in the darkness. Toothless rose his head a little, clawed the earth below him. Hiccup's hand touched him suddenly, and Toothless growled, shook it away. These were the same Timberjacks that he'd seen when he met Skari that time on the sea. They had the same ugly smell. He pulled himself forward, closer to the edge of the cliff, his eyes moving fast over the jagged rocks and the reflective river far below.

"What's the matter?"

Hiccup's voice was understandably concerned and quiet. Toothless growled, popped his snout over the landscape, hissing.

Then he saw it. The small cluster of long, folded wings, the reverberations in the water where the thin creatures were drinking. There were six of them, the moonlight picking out their shapes and the valley collecting their voices deftly. He listened to them humming, hissing, speaking among themselves of the night, of him, and of Skari. They never were going to give up, were they? What did _they_ gain in the feud?

Ormarr.

Toothless jerked his head up suddenly. That name- He got to his feet, ignored the small hands moving over him, the face trying to see his own. What was that about Ormarr? Toothless growled low and threateningly. The Timberjacks hummed again, far below, barely audible. _Crazy . . . ships . . . Skari . . ._ The words hissed out in pieces hard to understand. Something was going on, Toothless knew, and it irritated him that he couldn't tell what. Toothless snapped his head, yapped thickly.

"Toothless, what's wrong?"

He gazed up at Hiccup, his boy. He wouldn't understand, would he? Or more that he couldn't. How can a dragon explain such things to someone, though of one mind, but another tongue? Toothless jerked his head away, back at the cluster of Timberjacks beginning to fade into the blackness of the night. _Skari will end him, him and that human he is so fond of . . . _And then a laugh, a shrill dragon's laugh, tickling up into the night sky. A cloud washed over the moon suddenly, paled gray the landscape, gray and black. The Timberjacks vanished, the water lapped still, and Toothless backed from the cliffside, a hot anger welling up inside of him. He looked back at Hiccup, found the glimmer in those big eyes, shadowed in concern. Toothless stuffed his snout into Hiccup's chest, closed his eyes. If what Skari said was true, and it was - and if he was the cunning evil dragon Toothless knew he was, what would stop him from bringing Hiccup into his mad scheme? If the accusation was treason? And if what Ormarr said was true . . . _Skari is smart. He'll use that boy against you. . . ._

He hadn't taken the great dragon seriously, thought Ormarr was just being overly protective and a little too belittling of his human friend. But now, the idea became very real. The feeling came over him, something complex in his mind yet clear in his gut. If he were

Skari, if revenge was his goal, then he wouldn't just kill the Night Fury. He'd corner him, trap him. And then hurt the one he loved most, let him watch and let him suffer.

That pure arrogance of Skari, that despicable species. Toothless snorted suddenly and flexed his jaws, felt some ancient instinct come over him, a hot blackness he hadn't felt in a long time. He almost hoped he'd meet Skari again, and blast that insulting face of his. Generations of Night Furies had fought and won against the Skrills, had killed Skrills. His father died fighting them, and he had raised him in his ways.

Toothless got his nose out of Hiccup's gentle hands, looked up forcefully at the boy. He turned, looked out at the landscape with a fury worthy of his species. He stood firm on his legs, both of them, and deftly wrapped his tail around, closer to Hiccup, enclosing the boy vaguely, the one tailfin resting lonely on the ferns falling gently into the rock and shoots of grass beneath them.

He was smarter than Skari, that much he knew.

25. Chapter 22: Unholy Past

a/n: *phew!* What a scramble is life. XD This chapter, though a couple days late, is one of my favorites. It's got a nice unity to it, among the viewpoints. The picture to go with it is also different, a pencil drawing this time. I like the change! Digital painting takes more effort than my schedule allows at the moment.

Also, I'd like to ask our readership for their thoughts on the story so far. We have some surprises down the road, and I hope it's not feeling like the story is dragging on.

View the illustration at the official webpage. Put a period where the dashes are: [howtotrainyourdragon2 - thecomicseries - com](http://howtotrainyourdragon2-thecomicseries-com)
>or at my deviantArt gallery: [inhonoredglory - deviantart - gallery - 38855965](http://inhonoredglory-deviantart-gallery-38855965)<p>

* * *

><p>How to Train Your Dragon II
>The Dragon Whisperer

**Act II
>A World Shattered
**

**Chapter 22
>Unholy Past

Two days had passed since the Hooligan chief had left the isle of Berk. Three days had passed since the chief's niece had started a war whose ramifications had yet to be fully known. Six days had passed since one small boy had looked over the sea and saw a strange armada of ships and wondered innocently who they were.

She was angry, the girl named Heather. She didn't quite know how to deal with the fact that her prey had lived, that maybe this was the reason her dear father was still plagued. She wondered if maybe there

was more than a curse in this son of Stoick's. Whatever it was, it had given him a strength to come here, an armada behind him or not, and pushed him to such lengths as saving a mere dragon from capture. It was strange, and in the darkest corner of her heart, she was curious.

The water dragons humming around Stoick's battered army were not driven away from the sacrifice taking place. They lingered, having heard the distress of their honored friend Ormarr, having watched him destroy and vanquish the Viking armada. They were scared for him, scared not merely because so many of them had great respect for the old dragon, but, more objectively, a creature that large could do horrible things if his mind was not with him. They lay quiet and solemn in the waters under the tattered ships, smelled through the salty sea the hot scent of burning dragon flesh, and the deft wafting of ash that dotted out the moonlight streaming upon them.

Even as much as they hated the flying dragons, they could read the human creatures as easily as any of their dragon folk, and what they read was deception. Humans could not be trusted. Some still held out a hope, but more resigned to the idea that maybe Ormarr was wrong. Maybe Dagr was wrong. And that story of dragons and humans on Berk . . . a small reprieve in what was really the timeless, unforgiving conflict between man and beast.

And then the people at Berk. They weren't used to things like this. War, yes, but something as personal and surprising as an old brother coming back for vengeance. It hadn't happened apart from the legends. Stoick had made a fine chief for them. He had protected them against invaders, arguing tribes, he had fought valiantly, traded peacefully, but never, never caught by surprise. And as the story emerged and as the people put one thing to another, and the significance of Stoick's past and what he had done those days not too very long ago, it gave a sense of unease in the Isle of Berk. The women and children, those left to mend the wounded dragons, they mused, for they had all the time simply to wait for news and ponder the facts that had been so violently made known to them. There were no men left on the island, for Stoick, in a move all knew was desperate and filled with fresh hate, brought them all on his fateful journey across the sea.

Dragons lay dying and gasping in their own blood, warriors lay injured and ill in every available resting ground. The odor of the wounds of man and beast lifting into the air in a fog of, if not visible, but tangible pain and shock.

In the Ingerman house sat a lonely, quiet mother, the fire in her heart dampened by the disappearance of a son whom she never wanted to believe would do something as frightful as racing into the open sea. And in the Jorgenson house, a stillness, with father at sea with his chief, his heart brimming with confidence over the bravery of his son, and the mother, timid and desperately worried, for she knew the shortcomings of a boy much too self-assured.

The Hofferson house lay empty and quiet, the father a captain of his own ship, collecting the wounded in the turbulent aftermath of the Great Dragon, and mother watching her Chief on the flagship, observing the sacrifice to the gods, in the hopes that such an act might lead them to a young boy whom her daughter had followed into the misty emptiness of the ocean.

And in the Thornston house, a mother desperately worried for her two children, and a father in one of those unlucky ships at sea, struggling in recovery, his arm removed from him.

No one said much, for each knew the significance of what had taken place. Suddenly Berk's hidden secrets, and the history no one wanted to remember, had come to the fore.

Gothi, the old woman without a voice, she fingered that charred volume of the Hooligan past, let her pale white fingers rove over the words that were penned in an ink now fading and willing to be lost. Today, she read the words with fresh eyes, with the blunt realization that old wounds never heal, and that the sins of the past are never quite forgiven.

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"Make yourself comfortable. It's the best accommodations you'll get."

Tuffnut squinted, eyed up wickedly at the gruff Skirra VÃ©llite who'd dragged them here. It was a dark tunnel, dragons and dragon cages lining its walls, the tunnel entrance yards and yards up in the blackness. There was a commotion at the Hall just before he led them out, just after that incident that had his sister staring at him oddly for the rest of the uneventful trip.

"What did you tell him?" she mouthed again and he turned away. It was one thing to play with these people, which was fun and everything, but to raise suspicion by asking stupid questions?

Everything was going to be fine. "Shut up, okay?" he whispered hotly, leaning back and letting the words slide out of his mouth. It was just a simple lie he'd told them. Enough to get them off her back and stop pestering her, way back in the Hall. So long as they didn't check up on the story, he was fine.

"You think our chief is going to be very happy about this kind of treatment?" Tuffnut piped out loud quickly, stuffing his chin out at the sordid character leering at him from the other side of the prison bars. He pursed his lips out at the man, looked purposefully gross, which wasn't too hard, considering he'd been perfecting the art all his life.

"You think you're so smart. Bah!" The man flipped a hand up and the shadows of men around him shifted their torches away. The light played off the bars sharply, casting long strips of shadows behind him and Ruff and Snotlout.

"I'm not of the belief that your story is true." The man leaned in, exhaled into Tuffnut's face. "You're lucky the chief's daughter gave strict orders not to send you down to the Blood Daggers." He jabbed a thick finger down the tunnel, deep into the descending blackness.

"B-b-blood daggers?" Snotlout's whimper came blubbering behind Tuff.

"Yes," the man hissed, grasping the bars suddenly and making them

clang with the thick shimmer of metal shaking. "The ruthless, killer dragons, hungry and desperate for meat. They wait, expectantly, for that door to open and for a guilty victim to get thrown in. Within hours . . ." He let his voice hum slowly, as he wrapped his sight around Snotlout. Tuff could even feel a spark of spookiness himself. "Before night is over, only _bones_ remain." He leaned back suddenly, laughed a huge laugh, strangely lighthearted and chilling in its joy. One of the torchbearers behind him shook his head and Tuff raised a brow at him, and the other man averted the gaze, moved up towards the entrance of the tunnel.

The man stopped laughing at long last, wiped his eyes and smoothed out the coat of mail covering his dark woolen clothing. "Come." He gestured his companions and moved up, shaking his fist playfully at the dragons that hummed irritably in the cages lining the tunnel. The light from the torches flickered on the captured beasts, their groaning lilting as the fire passed them. They must have fought those bars a long time, Tuff thought, squinting to see the charred metal on the bars going up the prisons.

The light faded from the torches as the men became smaller and smaller up the dark tunnel. Darkness filled the air, dark and a cold empty clamminess that made it disgusting to breathe. Tuffnut took a breath of the musty, moldy air, perked his eyes. It was a new smell, that's for sure. Not like you get this everyday.

A punch met his shoulder suddenly. "What did you tell them?"

He turned, could barely see his sister in the blackness. "What do you mean?"

"You know perfectly well what I mean. You whispered something and they let me go. Now spill it!"

"Gee whiz, just trying to help you out. Chill. Just some story. What? You thought I'd squeal on the others? I'm not stupid."

"Hey I didn't call you stupid, okay? Man, when'd you get so touchy?"

"I just told them a big giant army was coming after them." He flapped his arms wildly, for emphasis. It was nothing, just some cool data that hopefully would scare them.

"That's so dumb," Ruffnut lolled. "They'll check up on that the minute they get a chance and figure out we're alone. Sheesh."

Tuffnut shook his head. "Whatever." She probably couldn't see the motion anyway in this black hole. He leaned out on the bars, felt warm bodies next to him. On his right, Snotlout was humming something. _Probably going to his happy place_. Tuffnut rolled his eyes.

But it wasn't. Snotlout poked him. "What's that sound?"

"What sound?" Tuffnut looked up, squinting in the faint hum of orange light from a torch stuck to the wall some ways up the tunnel. He could hear dragons, breathing, the sound of giant creatures inhaling and exhaling with the sigh and exhaustion of captivity. He could hear

the echo of water somewhere in the black, dripping, flowing even, down, trickling past them into the dark recess that supposedly housed those Dagger dragons. And then the silence. He could hear the silence and smell the mustiness and the sharp cold. The more he thought about it, the colder it got. He could hear the crick and flicker of some small creatures, insects and tiny reptiles maybe. There weren't any glowing cave creatures here, though, which was strange.

And then another sound.

"Morning . . . _mor-_"

He crossed his eyes.

"Hear that?" Snotlout slapped the bars again. "I told you we weren't alone."

Tuffnut swallowed. "Hey voice, speak up again!" He yelled. No point in beating around the bush.

"Aaargh . . ." it hissed, and Tuff leaned forward, pushed his face to the cold wet bars. The voice was in front of him, maybe in the cell just opposite them. He looked closer, could pick out a shape in the darkness, maybe it was moving. And then fingers, moving into the faint light and twisting around the metal bars. "Strangers," he whispered, as he came into view. As much of a view Tuffnut was going to get. The man was thin, thin oily strands of hair coming down from his head, a dirty beard hanging down from his chin, tattered clothing spotted with something that could range from grubs to stains to mold. He slid along the ground, and curved his knees up to support his shaky weight. He looked up at the kids. "You're _new_ here," he said, barely audible, slowly and deliberately, suspiciously as it were.

"Um . . . yeah." Ruffnut said, to the left of Tuffnut.

"First them dragons, and then three new captives. What did you do?"

Tuffnut cleared his throat. This guy looked like he was one hundred years old. How long was he in here anyway?

"We're not spies!" Snotlout shouted suddenly, before Tuff could say anything. The yell awoke some of the dragons in the cells up from them, and some dragon with fire still left in him blasted out a ball of flames into the rock. The heat pulsed through the tunnel once, vanished with a sigh as the tunnel melded into darkness once again.

The man looked back at the kids, a flicker in his eye. "You didn't lose yer head, did ya? They say I can't find mine." He grinned and even in the darkness, Tuff could make out a creepy set of teeth staring back at him. The guy gave him the shivers. Like it was his job around here. Maybe he was another trick up the Skirra VÃ©llite sleeves, creep out the suspects and make them spill it. Well it wasn't going to work.

"Have you 'eard of the great dragon feud?" The man rolled the words around in his tongue, licking his lips and leaning back into the darkness. "Last thin' I remember. The last thing I . . ." His voice

trailed, and he mumbled something to himself, like he was searching for some long forgotten memory.

"I'm not one of them," he said suddenly, with a sharp certainty, in a disgusted conviction. He spat on the ground for good measure, stared down at the pool of spittle for a moment before going on. "Those people, they're mean." He leered back up the tunnel.

Tuffnut sighed. This was getting boring, and pointless. "Hey, maybe we can chat some other time, we-"

"Don' interrupt a man who's talking, 'specially an elder." The man snapped sharply at them, eyeing them coldly.

"Gee, fine. Chill it, not like I was interrupting anything particularly-" Tuff coughed into his fist. ". . . important."

The man didn't seem to hear him. Tuff wondered what he could hear anyway. "As I was saying . . . before you interrupted me." He shot an unforgiving stare at Tuffnut. "My frien' he wasn't affected, when the dragons had at it, those stupid creatures. But what a beautiful sight it was. I still remember. The las' thing tha' was clear to me, now, after these times. They say it was now sixty some years. White, lots of white and blue light." He waved his shaky hands over his face, playing his fingers like fireworks over his eyes. "One creature died and one flew off, beautiful sight it was. Beautiful. And when I touched the light . . . they say it got me. Slowly, they say. I can't trust them." He narrowed his eyes suddenly, leered back at the entrance of the tunnel. "But my frien' told me that too, so maybe . . . no, they're wrong. They trapped me here, and I don' deserve it."

Tuffnut cleared his throat again. "Cool story," he hummed, and maybe it would be interesting, if it weren't so dumb.

"Stupid dragons . . ." the old man grumbled, pulling away from the bars. "Maybe my frien' will get me out of here. He visits me, says he'll get us all out, that they made all his people slaves. Is it true?" His whisper was cold, yet honest and fearful.

"Man, I don't know," Tuff exhaled. The poor guy was getting on his sympathy nerves. "I just got here myself."

"He said they made us slaves. He's going to start a rebellion, a peaceful rebellion." He spat again on the ground, muttering things as he shifted again into the dark corner of his cell, away from what little light there was to see him. "Peaceful rebellion, he said it could be peaceful . . ." The voice faded, crumbled away into the black.

Tuff looked at his sister. She shrugged her shoulders. "Weird," she whispered.

"Hey," Snotlout mumbled suddenly, poking Tuff. Tuffnut latched his arm away, offended. "Hey those dragons that guy was talking about?" Snotlout said.

"Yeah, what about them?" Ruffnut leaned past Tuff slightly.

"Remember that story Hiccup told us? Back at home."

Tuffnut could hear Snotlout swallowing. "What about it?"

"I don't know, maybe they're related to this. Somehow. It sounds similar."

Gee whiz, all this mystery. "Hey Snotlout, you're thinking. I'm proud of you!" he lolled, rolling on his heels.

"Hey watch what you're saying." Snotlout was understandably irked.

"Guys, cap it, okay?" Ruffnut sighed, and Tuff felt her moving behind them, her voice exhausted. "Let's just get on the idea of getting out of here. Before they find out Tuff told them a bunch of hogwash."

Snotlout shot his nose at Tuffnut. "Stupid."

"Idiot," Tuffnut shot back, jabbing his nose into Snotlout's.

He could feel Ruffnut crossing her arms, and caught a glimpse of her shaking her head, the braids shaking. "I guess it's going to be a long night."

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Hiccup wasn't a kid to hold a grudge, and he wasn't about to either. But seeing that girl again . . . he looked down at his shoulder, blood still visible in the blue shafts of moonlight through the tall conifers. His heart was beating faster, and he swallowed, feelings inside of him he couldn't understand. Except to call them shock, still a shock, and a kindled hum of anger. He put a hand to his eyes, didn't want to think about it, not with her hatred a permanent scar on his body. She took Toothless, was responsible for so much death in the little island he called home. That ember of anger warmed inside of him, flickered alive. His jaw tensed, and he looked out at the blue forest, the open space in front of him and Toothless, the concave of the small valley and the river. To see her, but shocked and stripped of her veneer of control . . .

He just wanted to get Toothless home, end this war, whatever it was coming to, get home and get things back to the way they were supposed to be. He wanted that, desperately now, his body tired, exhausted, his eyes finally heavy staring blankly at the drifting fog settling near the water, unfocused. He wanted his bed at home suddenly, with the fire downstairs flickering and warm, his father stumbling into his room to say good night . . . The last time they spoke it wasn't exactly the easiest conversation. What was his father up to now? He hadn't thought of what his Dad might do to find him and the rest of the teens. He hadn't thought he'd care.

But in the calm of the moon and the quiet lonely forest in the land of the enemy, he missed his Dad. It wasn't much. He just wished he could see him. Hiccup inhaled, put it out of his mind. He had to concentrate, on fixing Toothless and getting out of here. He already thought about how to get Toothless in the air again. Just a vine and some old school steering. It wasn't going to be easy, but it would work. He looked down at Toothless, the dragon calm and resting.

"You okay, bud?" Hiccup whispered, patting the cool black scales with his one hand. Even in the darkness he could read the glimmer of dimly shining blood where Toothless had been hit. He didn't really know how it happened, figured it was just plain cruelty. Which really wasn't surprising for a society that didn't respect dragons the way Berk had grown to do. He squinted, let his mind clear a minute, breathed in the fresh cool air and gently rotated his own arm, wincing to find the stab wound still humming complaints at him. It was amazing he hadn't been bedridden since that day. Well, that was what adrenaline did, made you do things even you thought were impossible.

Toothless hummed up at him, nudging his snout forward, saying something.

"Yeah, I'm getting this fixed." Hiccup crossed his legs under him. "You want a bite of something first? I found some berries." Hiccup dragged a flat panel of moss closer to him through the thin grass. The moss was so thick here it could hold a couple handfuls of those icky round berry things they generally avoided on Berk. But here, in this part of the forest, it was the only sustenance he could find quickly, without leaving Toothless too long, and to be honest, he was starving. Cold, hungry, and tired. The rush of adrenaline wasn't exactly the best thing for him physically, he quickly realized. It had drained out of him whatever was left of the fumes he was going on. Right now he wanted to rest. Sleep even, under Toothless' wing, like he'd done not so long ago.

But right now wasn't the time for relaxation. He stuffed the berries into his mouth and shook his head. Toothless, resting gently on the ground, didn't look too relaxed, either, his ears alert and his eyes, scanning the black forest as if he expected something awful to pop out of the dark, moonlit woods. Hiccup sucked at his tooth. That was the other thing about those berries. Too many seeds . . .

"Here, bud, take a few." He pushed the rest of the berries next to Toothless' snout.

The dragon huffed, growled at the black pile of fruit.

"I know they're not fish, but it's gonna have to do."

Toothless hissed, shook his head sharply.

"Toothless . . ." Hiccup slumped. "There's not a lot of choices, buddy."

The dragon hummed low, irritated, glanced up at Hiccup, popped a click in his throat. He sniffed at the berries, nudged them. He picked one up deftly and rolled it into his mouth.

"Awful, right?" Hiccup smirked at him.

Toothless' face shrunk into folds of displeasure. He glanced down at the berries dubiously. Well, Hiccup sighed. Gotta make do.

He slipped out from under the berries that other thing he'd located in the forest, thin fibrous leaves, a sprig of them. They made ropes and canvas with them on Berk. It was thin enough, strong enough . .

.
He looked at Toothless' injury, the open wound spilling new blood. He bit his lip. The escape didn't help with that. It had broken it open again, and now it was soaking out new, slowly down Toothless' shoulder and leg. Hiccup tore through the leaves, the thin filaments, the waxy white fibers, deft and familiar in his fingers. They couldn't go anywhere until he fixed that. He slipped out from his belt the thin sharp thorn he picked up that night. Toothless was in the same position he was in, the same . . . injury. What was it with them? He let out a small smile. "First I get it and now you?" He patted his own shoulder and Toothless hummed, wavered his eyes at him, shook his head, hotly. The dragon was not amused. Toothless moved up closer, tilted concerns at Hiccup. "Okay, okay. . . I won't make jokes." Hiccup backed away from the licks of affection, reached behind his belt, pulled out the small dagger and scooted up close to Toothless, pushed the mat of moss away. Toothless blinked at the weapon, as Hiccup put his right hand on Toothless' neck, holding the dagger in the other. He set his jaw, his left shoulder still declaring itself unfit for action. The knife hovered over the wet injury a moment. Hiccup examined the spot, breathing consciously suddenly, peering up at Toothless from behind his hair. The dragon glanced between him and the knife, the black of the night hiding his features.

Hiccup swallowed. "I'm just closing the wound, it's going to be all right. It'll just . . . hurt a little. At first."

Toothless' expression remained unchanged, those eyes unsure, unblinking, watching him.

He felt nervous suddenly, cleared his throat. "Just trust me?" He turned away from those eyes, gulped, moved the knife in closer. Make it quick and fast, and get it over with. He secured one end of the loose skin with his right hand, the moisture making him smart. He touched the skin with the edge of the dagger, pausing suddenly. Even in the cold night, he felt a chill run through him. He slumped back, rubbed his wet stained hand on the grass. He didn't meet the dragon's eyes, looked down at the gleam of the knife in his hand, breathed in.

. . . cut out your heart and take it to my father.

He'd had nightmares about that moment, sometimes, when he was stressed out, imagining if he'd carried out that promise. And now . . . Even if it was to help him, holding that knife to Toothless was just a little too much for him.

A warm hum met his ears suddenly, rising in pitch. Hiccup glanced up, met Toothless' big shining eyes, his head nudging up at him. There was something different in those eyes now, the cold stare was gone. Toothless looked at the knife, snuffed his nose at it, brought up a black smooth paw and laid it on Hiccup's leg. Hiccup squinted his eyes, unsure exactly . . . what was going on in his friend's mind. "Um . . . what is it, buddy?" Toothless closed his eyes and opened them, stared up at Hiccup. There was meaning in those black orbs. Hiccup drew his head closer. A gentle meaning. Hiccup put his hand on the warm, black snout, his swallow tight in his throat. Toothless let out a low, soft murmur, looking at the knife. So Toothless remembered, too? Of course he did. Neither one of them was going to

forget that day in the forest, that day a Night Fury was brought down, the day it was almost killed by a quiet, desperate boy from the village.

"So it's . . ." Hiccup's mouth was dry suddenly. "It's all right?" The words came out quiet, barely audible. Toothless hummed, pulled back, bent his neck slightly away to keep the injured area exposed to the faint light of the moon.

Hiccup bit his lip, glanced back down at the knife.

Only enough to get the stitching done, to get the fiber through the cut and close it. Hiccup looked up, the dragon nodded gently, humming. It was all right. Hiccup bent forward, his palms on the ground, looked into Toothless' eyes. "Thanks, bud."

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He'd done it for Hiccup. Toothless remained calm, even encouraged the boy with the knife. Another dragon would call him stupid, to trust a human like that. One who had a precedent for almost killing you . . .

That forest's clearing, the high branches circular around him rising to a sky he couldn't reach, the knife and the boy's promise of heated anger that even he could tell meant danger, and that was long before he learned to interpret human speech.

As old instincts came drifting back in the darkness, as that wariness came upon him, as the boy in the shadows knelt by him with that glimmer of a blade in his hand. But then . . .

"Just trust me."

Hiccup was different, and he needed no defense from him, nor did he need to fear.

Toothless hummed and eyed the boy again, closely. His face was hard to see, so near him and facing down into the wound. But he could feel the small warm breaths on his scales, the wet, almost shaky fingers grasping the skin of his neck. The small body near him, kneeling, and the fingers moving deliberately over the sensitive area. Something extremely thin was in those fingers, moving through the cut in the skin. It burnt as it slid, but not like fire. Toothless narrowed his eyes at the subtle difference, knew that this wasn't the blade. This thin something, it was weaving into his skin, pulling it, tightening it. His breath flickered. Toothless jerked his head up, suddenly felt the urge to see it. The dark shadow of his own wing was over him, and the moonlit shape of the boy, but he couldn't twist his head far enough, it was too close. The fingers suddenly moved over the side of his head, the arm blocking his view. He moaned in irritation, tried to flick off the hand's gentle pressure. He didn't want to lie still anymore.

"Shhhh," Hiccup's whisper above him, soft yet clear in the quiet of the night. Toothless stopped, the fingers still touching his face, but not pressuring him anymore. He perked his ears at the voice he knew, waiting for something definite said to him, a word or two. But Hiccup only hummed, a pleasant, lilting hum that rose in strength yet sparked with something delicate. The sound tapped with the trickle of

the stream, weaved into a rhythm of the human voice that he only rarely heard within the homes of Berk, and then, hardly addressed to dragons. A movement of sound he could only describe as . . . beautiful.

Toothless hummed softly, as soft as he could mimic that sound. He could sense Hiccup's voice timing with his own, humming in a more gravelly tone and almost laughing. He could feel the great breaths between the hums, a certain whiff of strain in them, yet more than that, it was cheer. Toothless clicked his tongue, felt a wonderful tingling calm wash over him as that familiar breath touched his ear and whispered.

"Hey," Hiccup laughed. "You don't sing bad, bud. Keep it up."

He heard the boy smile, and he yapped back. He rumbled a contented purr, let his body relax and his mind hush as the sound of their voices rang together in the night. They'd hurt the boy, hurt him bad, yet Hiccup didn't let that stop him from finding him again. He knew before, but now, somehow, it felt real, it felt precious. Not many would do this for a dragon.

After sixty some summers, Toothless was still young in the dragon world. There were dragons he knew, back in the Cold Lands, or residing in the depths of the sea, who saw hundreds of summers before him, maybe even thousands. His father told him so, for his father was one of them. A thousand three hundred summers were a lot to live through, even for a dragon. Like his father used to say. _You meet many in such a lifetime, and many say they are your friend. And you live to see them fail you._ _There are few to trust and even fewer to love. A Night Fury flies the highest among dragons, he leads the greatest of dragons, but he lives alone._

Orphaned in his first winter, on this very island, he took comfort in that counsel. He told himself this was the way of his species, that he was only thrust prematurely into an adulthood he was already destined to live. He made enemies, that was easy, and he looked out for himself, because all around him did the same. The flock required every member to be strong. No one licks your wounds for you.

But now . . .

He pressed his face into Hiccup's figure near him, still kneeling by his side, still singing to him, still mending his hurt. He purred again, deeply this time, in tune with the boy's song, and snuggled his face into the boy's knees in the dirt, and closed his eyes.

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Hiccup had run through almost all the lullabies he knew before he came to the end of stitching up the wound. They were songs his Dad used to sing to him when he was very little. Hiccup smiled. Dad always sung them quietly, like he was afraid some village woman might hear him and peg him as a softie.

Who would think of that? _His_ Dad the chief? Hiccup rubbed his nose, realized the mess of dark blood on them, from fixing Toothless' wound. He swallowed. This wasn't exactly his business, as his Dad had long said. War, wounds, and him the absolute amateur doing operations on a dragon. Guess he'd have to face that normalcy at some point. All

his life his father had kept him spared from much of the bloodshed and violence of life as a Viking.

Including the idea of letting him die as a kid.

He bit his lip, looked down at Toothless, the dragon purring like a delighted baby. Even among humans, there were things in the past that went unsaid. He sighed. "And what's your story, eh, bud?" He ran his hand gently over the fresh stitching. That great dragon he'd seemed to have an affection for, the Skrill and the feud the slave Hervi had spoken of . . . it was all a mystery to the boy. He hated it.

But he'd gotten used to not knowing. On nights when he stayed up talking about his problems, changes he wanted to make at the Academy, big plans and big dreams he had for his own life, traveling and getting to know all kinds of dragons and showing how much other people can love them and not fight them - when Toothless just hummed lovingly, understandably it seemed, and nudged his nose into Hiccup. The words unspoken, if there were any, but always present, the care and tenderness that no one had shown him before or since. Even with Astrid, it wasn't the same. There was something special he had with the dragon, and it would go blissfully unexplained.

And yet he wished he knew more of the other side of their friendship. Toothless' side. What did the dragon want to say? Did he ever want to vent his frustration on a trusting friend?

The language barrier. Maybe he was being selfish for wanting to know more.

He pursed his lips, patted Toothless' shoulder and balanced unsteadily on his feet, felt the ache in his knees and shoulders suddenly, a numbness from hours of close work. His left fist still clenched the knife. He was amazed that arm held up as much as it did, but it wouldn't be long before the stress got to his own injury. They had to get moving.

Toothless perked his ears, watched Hiccup a moment and fell back, pushed his own snout into the stitches as best as he could reach them, his tongue lathering suds over the fresh blood. It probably was the first time he could lick his wounds, free from that muzzle.

Hiccup stepped away from Toothless, slipped quietly down the grassy green-black slope highlighted with blue from the moon above. The stream clattered softly in the moonlit river valley, sparkled specks of blinding white in the folds of water running down to the right, the face of the forest a thick wall on the other side of the small river. He sprinted across the short field of small pebbles on the shore, felt the rounded faces under his boot, heard the gravelly crunch of his step in the immense stillness of the night.

He knelt down carefully to the water, threw his bloody hands into the wash, watched the stain come off his fingers. Something troubled him inside, and he turned back, saw Toothless' flickering eyes watching him from the little shelter of trees a couple yards away.

It was quiet now, but so much had happened. What was he going to do here now? He was so far from home. It hadn't occurred to him. Not much had in the madness of desperation to save his friend. But with

him now, his mind could clear a bit, and what he saw was a mess of confusion.

How to get home? How to save the kids? Get home safely? And the war they were preparing now, those poor dragons. And the slaves . . . but like Astrid said, what could one boy do?

He had to get to the meeting place, and hopefully she had some better news about the fate of Ruff, Tuff, and Snotlout. They'd have to make a run for his ship. It was a good plan, simple. It didn't need to be complicated.

But could he walk away from the things he saw in that town? Astrid had accused him of being irresponsible. So what was his responsibility now?

Going home didn't seem quite like the option now.

He looked up at the moon, the light a blinding freshness on his weary eyes. He inhaled the white coldness in the air, let the air pulse into his lungs, fill him with a temporary alertness. He couldn't sleep now. There was no time for luxuries.

He heard something behind him suddenly - Toothless, growling. He almost turned, saw a flash suddenly in the sky, flashing past the moon.

Only a moment.

And then it was gone.

Toothless growled behind him, the sound close suddenly. Hiccup felt a panic drive up him, and he knew there was something deadly in Toothless' growl. He whirled, too late, as claws slapped against his sides, a black shadow pinning him down. He twisted his head up, a huge breath flying out of him, the vision of Toothless suddenly over him and pressing his black body against his own. "Toothless-" The dragon was standing over him, something angry flashing in his eyes and filling up his throat.

So Hiccup hadn't been mistaken about that shape in the moonlight. Those thick wing spikes, the long tail, the barbs along his back, the ring of spikes on his neck . . .

"It's the Skrill, isn't it?" he whispered up, at Toothless.

The dragon snorted harshly into Hiccup's ear, making the boy wince. The last time these two met, violence was in the air. So what was Toothless trying to tell him? And why was he protecting him now? What was the deal with this ancient feud? Something seemed to have changed in Toothless' behavior to the Skrill from back then and now. What happened to the active sense of vengeance he felt before? What was this new protectiveness? Dragons didn't do that. They went after their opponent, they didn't run. And Toothless, least of all. Even unable to fly, he wanted to face that Whispering Death head on to settle some score. But this time?

Something was different.

Hiccup held still as he felt the black body close over him, the smell

of scales and blood and dirt and adrenaline all pressing into his head underneath the roof of the dragon's body. And the savage, guttural growling - so low yet so tangible in his ear right above him.

"Toothless, stop it," he spoke suddenly, forcefully. He put a hand out, dug his fingers into the sand and ever so slightly pulled himself forward on his back, just enough to get under Toothless' head. He eased his motion, felt the moisture hot on his forehead and his shoulder complaining.

Toothless hummed back something cutting, and Hiccup wondered if it was directed at him or not. "Buddy, just let me out of here, okay?" he chuckled, trying to bring a different mood to the situation. "Um . . . buddy?" He could feel Toothless still looking up, concentrating on the sky, and holding still. At least, he wasn't fighting. Not yet. Hiccup waited, until he felt Toothless let out his breath, then he slid along the ground again, forward, Toothless letting him escape the cover of his wings. Hiccup rose up warily, searched the sky quickly. It was clear and empty. Whatever the Skrill was doing, he was gone now.

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Toothless snorted back at the empty sky, scanning for any trace of Skari. The Skrill hadn't seen him or the boy, he was sure of that, but that dragon would stop at nothing to break both their necks. Such was his undying hatred, a hatred still alive after the many passing seasons. He knew Skari was coming back.

The wretched evil of that dragon.

Toothless snarled, felt the heat rising in his throat. Just come a little closer, Skari. _Let me tear my teeth through you._

"Toothless?"

His name shocked him, and he glanced down. Hiccup was peering into him, eyes furrowed, his face tight. He was glancing back at the sky, and putting his hand out towards him.

"It's okay bud."

No it's not.

"He's, he's gone now." Hiccup looked up into the sky.

You don't understand.

"Bud, please-"

Hiccup-

Hiccup backed away, and his hand withdrew, something inexpressible in his face. And suddenly Toothless realized he had been snarling at the boy.

Toothless abruptly toned down into a quieter hum. He didn't mean to take it out on Hiccup, but it's just . . . the boy didn't understand.

He turned his face from Hiccup, concentrated on the fire smarting in his throat. That was the problem. The boy wasn't there, sixty summers ago, in a migration of generations and a clash of species older than the mountains. The boy didn't fly with him into that black night storm, just a yearling Fury on a foreign island, trembling in a chill colder than snow. He didn't see the blue and violet fires flashing across the dome of the sky, screaming under the claps of night thunder. The streak of familiar black wings, the wings protecting him, and those foreign gray ones, sharp with hatred, attacking from the depths of the island. The island they thought was the end of the journey, a journey promising a new home, but delivering only death. The wings flashing, the strike in midair, the energy, the lightning, the power of the plasma-

He flexed his jaws, slicing his teeth against each other. It happened so long ago, and how could he make Hiccup understand?

"Toothless . . ."

The dragon whirled, at the sound of his name. Hiccup said it softly, questioningly, and when he searched the boy's face, he could see an honest question in them. If it was one thing they had between them in communication . . . each one could know if the other was curious. Curiosity ran through them, and this time it was a serious curiosity, a pensive, honest question. He deserved an answer. Toothless wanted to tell him. He had to. Skari meant business, and they were in the island now. There was a way to show him. Toothless let his eyes wander, to the depth of the forest, and in his mind's eye he envisioned the place, that place he hadn't seen in almost sixty summers. A shiver hummed through his body.

But it might be the only way to tell Hiccup.

Toothless looked up at the sky, at the place where the Skrill had vanished behind the trees. Hiccup followed his gaze. The dragon lilted a hum sharply, urged the boy to follow him. Hiccup nodded deftly, an unspoken understanding, and Toothless swiveled on his feet as his boy stepped swiftly beside him, moving with him into the dark overhang of the forest's heart.

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The ground was soft under him, mossy and wet through his boots. The forest was thick here, the branches low and thick against the deep blue sky above and the shafts of moonlight splintering through the trees. There was a gentle wind, warm almost, against the cool of the night. Hiccup felt his skin pulse to the change of temperature, and he inadvertently shivered, as the wave of warmer air passed and coldness wrapped around him.

"How long, buddy?" he whispered, stepped over the moss and large fallen trees under him. Toothless hummed, stopped suddenly, a soft crunch of leaves under his feet, and looked back at Hiccup. His eyes were alive with intention. Hiccup cocked his head to the side, a question on his lips. He looked up again, at the dark shadowed rock structure in front of him, a deep black cave, covered in green and shrubbery so thick he could barely make out the fact that a cave was there. Crumbles of dirt sat stuck to the side of the wall, with vines curling around the entrance and sprigs of ferns blanketing the front and edging into the forest.

Toothless jumped once through the grasses, towards the dark hole in front of them. He nudged his head at Hiccup.

So this was where Toothless was leading him?

They didn't have a lot of time. Astrid was waiting at the meeting place, and he'd spent too long here already. But-

If this was what Hiccup hoped it was . . . if this was Toothless trying to explain something to him. It felt like that. The way Toothless looked up into the sky and urged him forward. It was a move Hiccup knew he had to pay attention to. It was something he realized he desperately wanted, and he wasn't going to let Toothless miss that chance of telling him.

Hiccup stepped forward, let what little of the moonlight vanish above him as he entered the shadow of the cave. "Toothless?" He couldn't see the dragon in the blackness. "Toothless?" he whispered, leaning low, squinting.

The dragon hummed somewhere in front of him, and suddenly the cave lit up with a shot of blue plasma. Hiccup ran forward in the temporary light, stopped at Toothless' side. "What is it, buddy?" He put a hand on Toothless' head. There were cave creatures crawling over the walls, their light humming yellow and dull green, one corner draping in the thick light of those living things. He let the glow adjust in his eyes, made out the dark depth of the cave, how far in it went. Toothless urged him on again, leapt forward and glided through the floor of the cave. "Hey!" Hiccup stepped forward, trying to catch up. His metal leg tapped out a choppy rhythm, echoing sharply in the recess. He followed Toothless' growl into the darkness, wondered suddenly where the dragon was leading him. "Toothless, wait up!" he yelled, his voice reverberating chillingly around him, making his voice round and loud in the growing clamminess and chill.

Suddenly Toothless stopped. Hiccup yelped, skidded on the stone, his metal leg chattering. The dragon stepped back, lowered his head gently. His body heaved up in a long, deep, audible breath. The dragon kept it in a moment, let it out tensely, nervously.

This wasn't like Toothless. It wasn't fear, and it wasn't anger. It wasn't even curiosity, or irritation. "Toothless?" Hiccup stepped forward, suddenly feeling uncomfortable. Toothless moved forward slowly, into the darkness. Hiccup followed, hesitant. He could feel a change in Toothless, sense something different in his movement now, towards the dark corner of the cave. Toothless kept his head down, sniffed along the ground, didn't even look back when Hiccup called to him. This was private, Hiccup could feel that, and suddenly it struck Hiccup.

Toothless had been here before.

But when? That story that Hervi told when he saw Toothless, and Hervi lived here. So Toothless lived here, too . . .? But this place, this cave - why? And-

A blast of blue white light shot the air suddenly, cast sunlight on the walls of stone. Hiccup blinked, shocked, and there before him,

Toothless, head down towards . . . Hiccup looked closer. His breath caught inside him.

"Toothless . . ."

Bones. Brown, dirty, crumbled bones.

The plasma stuck to the walls, and the glow lingered, ebbing slowly to gray. Hiccup stepped forward, hurrying to the dead skeleton embedded in the dirt at Toothless' feet. He knelt down, the stone and earth cold on his knees, let his hands wander over the thin rib bones that struck up from the ground, the broken vertebrae that swept down from them and wavered over the blackness, into a long tail that vanished somewhere into the ground and stone and darkness. The wing bones so wide, so much larger than Toothless' and yet of the same proportion, the edges still bent at the joints, and fragments of membrane still hanging to the bones, quiet, lonely, still. And the wide pair of tailfins just below the wings, the joints incomplete and bare. The cracked skull at the top wider than Toothless' head and yet . . . Hiccup let out his breath, looked up at Toothless. It wasn't really a surprise to know that these were Night Fury bones.

He swallowed, reached out and put a deft hand on Toothless' foot. The dragon didn't respond, only . . . sighed, and bent down and lay on the ground, by the skeleton's head, those big eyes closed and in the faint light, even shivering delicately in the darkness. Hiccup looked down, at the remains of this dragon from ages before. Who was it? How long ago did he die? That Toothless knew him went without saying. There weren't many Night Furies in the Archipelago, the books all told of that. It wasn't a stretch to say that they knew each other, Toothless and this dragon that once lived. The bones were old, the flesh was gone and the creatures had already started working on the bones. A decade or longer? It was possible. Toothless before he met him, the wild Toothless, the life he'd led as a dragon in the world a dragon came from . . . belonged in. Hiccup looked at the quiet, breathing Night Fury lying beside him, and brought his hand away. "Hey, buddy . . ." he said softly, leaned in and whispered the words.

Toothless opened his eyes, slowly, and in the light glowing gently from them, Hiccup could read a grief, an immensity of feeling he had never seen from the dragon. And then anger, a fire of conviction and passion. Toothless jerked his head away, nudged the neck of the bones before him, looked up at Hiccup, telling him something.

Hiccup looked, leaned over on his hands and knees, keeping his left arm up, for it was getting stressed now, after those hours working on Toothless' injury.

What is it, buddy?

Toothless nosed the skull gently, letting it roll to one side. Hiccup looked closer, squinted. Toothless let out another blast of plasma, lit up the space in blue and white again. Hiccup touched the vertebrae carefully, let the light fill up the corners and the shadows between the segments of bone. He'd seen dragon bones before, not many times, but in a society where killing them had been the norm, it wasn't hard to come to know anatomy, and this was pretty clear. The bending crack in the neck, the violent distortion of the jaw . . . it was a terrible death. And then the teeth, there was

something else on them, like charred wood, a kind of darkened ash. It could have been the time, the years of decay, but something in Hiccup's gut told him no, this was something significant. Toothless wouldn't be here showing him this if it wasn't important. He looked up into his dragon's eyes, saw the snarl in them, the snarl that went up, rising with his head above, into the far top of the cave. He wasn't mad at nothing. It had something to do with that Skrill. Toothless wanted to tell him something about the Skrill, and this was it. This was the story. Something in Toothless' past, the death of family, someone older than him . . . maybe an older brother? A cousin? Maybe even Toothless' parent? He gulped, looked at his friend. He had taken him from a society of dragons, and even though Night Furies were loners, it still suddenly felt strange to part Toothless from his fellow creatures.

He looked back down on the skull and the broken neck of the dead Fury. He inhaled, closed his eyes, remembered the way Toothless was so angry at the Skrill, remembered the words of Hervi, that story about the feud between the species. It wasn't a mere grudge here, there was . . . death involved. The Skrill killed this dragon. He was sure of it now. It explained everything. The Spiral of Death the slave had spoken of, the charred teeth and the electrical power of the Skrill, the way Toothless reacted to the Skrill, that hate, that vengeance. There had been death, there had been murder. Hiccup opened his eyes, bit his lip. But was this the first such killing? Or did this anger go far longer than even Toothless or this dragon or the Skrill?

If a feud can still be murderous twenty years after the death of a love and the birth of a child, as it was for him and his father's brother, and if things like that could exist among supposedly intelligent human beings . . . how about dragons? How long could a feud hold when lifespans could go for even hundreds of years? And who was in the right? If there was such a place in a feud that may well have began so long ago no one knew the origins of such hate.

He took in a breath suddenly, realized his heart was pounding fast now, in the encroaching darkness and cold in this clammy wet cave. He felt like running, suddenly, taking Toothless away from these terrible memories, from this danger. Maybe it was a good thing he got to know him, draw him away from the wild where this feud existed. He got to his feet, the echo of his prosthetic sharp and clear. He tried to say something, found his voice choked. He stepped close to his friend, cleared his throat. "Buddy, let's go." His voice was thin. "I, uh . . . thank you for showing me this. I know it's gotta be hard, but . . ."

Toothless bent his head up, looked at Hiccup, urged him on with a gentle nod, those eyes full of understanding, and full of words Hiccup could not read.

"I know what's going on now." He put a hand on the dragon's head. "As much as I need to."

The dragon hummed, closed his eyes and rose, nuzzling his head quietly into the boy. Hiccup bit his lip, looked out far out to the entrance of the cave. The dim light was faint, so far away, and the glimmering cave creatures like faint stars on a cloudy night. The hollow hum of wind through the cavern, the chill of cold, and the growl, the thin humming growl somewhere outside. . .

Hiccup was alert suddenly, he could feel Toothless tense. The hiss increased and Toothless gave a yelp of alarm. Hiccup glanced at his friend, saw a worry in Toothless' eyes, a fire in them, and a conviction and an anger throbbing through those green orbs. "Toothless-" He almost knew without having to ask. He knew what Toothless was going to do, and he knew what dragon it was that was out there.

He heard the shrill scream of the Skrill the moment Toothless jumped on him, sheltered him again. Hiccup fell, his back snapping into the stone below. He yelled at the shooting pain. Toothless roared, a horrible screeching, angry roar. And his black scaly legs, wrapping around Hiccup's body. It was protection, Toothless desperately wanted to protect him. But why? Hiccup winced in the tight grip. This was the Kill Ring all over again, that day when Toothless came to save him, _protect _him from Hookfang. But what did the Skrill have against _him? _And why hamper your own ability to fight by doing this?

Hiccup could feel fire rev in the throat of the Night Fury. Toothless didn't have to do this, he didn't have to participate in this war, this mad feud. It was deadly, Toothless had shown him that. And Toothless was at a disadvantage. "Buddy, stop-" he gasped. He could hear the Skrill out there, squawking in a hiss filled with a history of hate and evil. Hiccup wasn't afraid when he fought the Red Death, and he wasn't afraid when he rode Toothless into dark, dangerous adventures innumerable in their time together. But now, trapped under his friend, knowing all too well what hate can do . . .

He didn't want to end up like Hervi, when he said that day in Berk, a night that seemed ages ago.

_The last time I saw a Night Fury . . . _

He was dead.

26. Good News!

****Author's Note****

Hey loyal readers of HTTYD2: The Dragon Whisperer, one half of the two-part writing team here, with great news!

For a couple months last year I got a little burned out with this story. Between my sister and me, we'd written a whole novel's worth of words, and the idea itself was many months old already. I found it hard to come up with new ideas and my sister picked up my slack on much of the writing. But recently, I've rediscovered my connection to the story and I'm excited to start writing more and posting much more often and regularly (at least, that's the goal). I do know how we started this project with a rigorous schedule in mind, and I still want to aspire to that.

My accelerated classes bottle-necked some of my enthusiasm in the weeks in which I was in the mood for this story, but those classes are ending this week, and I have opted not to take any more classes next term (my terms are 8 weeks long), so I can focus on this story and on other responsibilities that I've let lag due to distractions

and classes. This story is important to me personally, because my sister and I have planned so many deep and important things, such as moral challenges, adventure, and peril, and I want to give 100% to it. I realize I haven't been doing that lately, and I think the story may have suffered in pacing. I can't turn back the clock, but I can work harder from here on out for the rest of the story.

The next chapter is going to be the end of Act 2, and Act 3 will follow (there are 4 Acts in the story). Hopefully we can get that chapter up by the end of this week, when my schooling officially finishes. :D

Any thoughts you have on this story as a whole? Pointers for us, or critiques? We've learned a lot from some of you who've given us thoughtful comments and advice. We love to hear from our readers!

27. Chapter 23: When Enemies Cross

a/n: The climax of Act II! At long last :) Hope you enjoy it! Thanks for always being loyal, dear readers.

View the illustration at the official webpage. Put a period where the dashes are: [howtotrainyourdragon2 - thecomicseries - com](http://howtotrainyourdragon2-thecomicseries-com)
>or at my deviantArt gallery: [inhonoredglory - deviantart - gallery - 38855965](http://inhonoredglory-deviantart-gallery-38855965)<p>

* * *

><p>How to Train Your Dragon II
>The Dragon Whisperer

**Act II
>A World Shattered
**

**Chapter 23
>When Enemies Cross

For the longest time Astrid had concerned herself with Hiccup, distracted herself perhaps with the legitimate worry over his injury, about his stupid will in the madness, the way he handled - and mishandled - himself over here, where he was supposed to be mature
. . .

But now the rage inside her boiled over.

She'd kept it inside her, because she was mature enough to realize going out of control wasn't going to do anybody, her least of all, any good. If it was one thing she prided herself in, it was controlled violence. She was no Tuffnut, she wouldn't run into anything without knowing what she was up against, and she was no ordinary Viking, she wouldn't let emotions only drive her sense of vengeance. She didn't have a weapon in this place, so by what immature urge would she lash out at a fistful of Skirra VÃ©llites with her bare hands? She was busy enough keeping one very injured Viking boy in check himself from going mad over Toothless being separated from his sight. She had to take care of him. She had an investment in the kid. One day she was turning over her last name to him, and he needed to be alive for that.

Astrid pulled a punch on a particularly stout spruce tree that was leaning towards the ground in a strange curl, as if it once were twisted out of clay.

"Um . . . Astrid? That won't bring him here sooner." Fishlegs' voice was tiny.

Astrid whirled. She could feel her eyes narrowing at the round Viking teen. He was only sixteen now, he was still a little ignorant about everything, and maybe he didn't get the seriousness of this situation, and what it meant to her. She had doubts about Heather since the beginning. Sure, she didn't think it would go the lengths it did now, but they had, she had, and Astrid knew that if she wanted to, when the time was right, and she had that woman cornered, she wasn't going to come out alive.

The thought shocked her, slightly. But she was a Viking after all, and she was blunt with the truth, and truth it was. If you touch him, you're dead. If this weren't the enemy's land . . . If the battle started back at home would continue, she'd have dibs on Heather. If blood had to be shed in this war, she wasn't afraid to shed it. That was war, after all, and that was growing up. And what better fate for someone like that? No one got their hands on Hiccup. No one.

"Astrid, you okay?"

She blinked, inhaled. Fishlegs was looking really worried now, she could read that simple sense of concern in his eyes. He was a good kid, and she felt sorry for him being stuck here, without the other teens, without Hiccup, his best friend, and no Meatlug or parents. Must be hard on him.

"Yeah, I'm okay," she mumbled, kicking a rock on the dark black, moonlight-speckled earth below. She cleared her throat. "Hiccup's been gone for hours now. We need to get back to them . . ." She gestured in the direction of the town. The kids had to be saved at some point. It was sure a snag in their plan. "I'm getting worried about him. I don't know what happened. He might be killed for all I know." She swayed unevenly, flopped to a seat on a ragged felled trunk. She shivered, not cold, despite the fact that it was a frigid night, but shivered for a spark of fear, that the simple plan might have fallen through. If Hiccup didn't make it to the meeting place by now . . . what might have happened?

"We need to go back."

Fishlegs looked at her. "What?"

"She got them, I feel it."

"Yeah, but. But, but, they'll come. We have to trust him!"

She exhaled. "It's out of his control, Fishlegs. We have to help him. I can't sit here worrying that he's within shooting range of his killer. I need to know what happened. I'm getting bad vibes." She stood up, whipped her bangs away from her face and started north, into the thick forest, towards the town.

"Hey, wait for me!"

Astrid paused gently, waited for Fishlegs to pant up behind her. "You know it's tiring to sit and wait so long." His eyes gleamed softly in the dim light from the moon. A cloud moved over the light source suddenly, casting a dark black light over the scene of blue and shadows. Astrid turned back, heard something suddenly and squinted over the western woods, where the trees descended into shorter spires and mountainous upswells melded foliated and thick from the surface trees. There were sparks coming from one of those hills, like a muffled lightning show. And cut off from sight by, by . . . a cave in the hillside? She was standing on a kind of a hill with Fishlegs here, with the one end opening out into the valley before her and the town far below. But out there on the left . . . now dragon screams. Hot, angry, and-

"Toothless?"

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She wasn't normally cold. The weather was something she could handle. But tonight, the cold chill of the night air dug into her veins, bore down deep into her core. Heather shivered, looked around in the darkness of the forest around her, heard the shouts of her people, pursuing that escaping boy and the freed dragon. She was with them, deep in the thick pines, the hunting hounds with them now, barking and lipping at the edges of their leash. Someone shouted and sent them off, and she watched the dogs rush hotly through the greenery. The warrior who had commanded the dogs rode past her on his short black steed, bowed briefly, the night black and lightless on his features. She acknowledged him, kicked the flanks of her own black horse, galloped forward.

She wanted to be alone. Alone with the sharp emotions growing inside her. The wind struck her again, and she rode deeper into the forest, eyes alert and hungry for sight of that cursed son.

Fate had been busy these past days, but whose side was she on?

She reined in the horse, clapped to a stop on a jutting of stone overlooking the valley of trees. Where was he in this place? She was having doubts now of finding him. He'd escaped her sword, he'd evaded warriors on every side to steal back the dragon. And yet in the years he was alive, he was a disappointment to his father. At least for most of the time. But the man who forged that curse, her own father, was still dying from the loss of his love and the life of this boy. Maybe Fate didn't have a side. Maybe the gods were teasing her. She watched the sky, eyes alighting on a fleck of light, a shooting star on the horizon.

At the end of this, she'd know.

She turned back from the cliffside, clapped down into the cover of the darkness and canopy of branches, walked on for a while. They had yet to finish off Stoick's tribe. Prolonged war like this wasn't something she was fond of. She never really liked war. She wanted it short and fast and over. After they subjugated the Hooligans, it was going to be peace for them. Her father was going to let her take full chieftainship of the tribe. He was going to settle down, dwell on the memory of his love and the justice that he'd have carried out.

This snag in the plan, this dragon training and Hiccup's coming back here alive. She sighed hotly, spied a warrior panting up to her from a dark corner of the woods. Hiccup came here, and who knows who was with him? Maybe Stoick was here already, as they had learned from the spies. But why was the attack slow in coming? Where was the Viking counter attack? Why hadn't they been attacked now?

The warrior was at the foot of her horse now. "Yes?" she asked. He was a messenger.

He was panting, hands on his knees, shards of leaves and branches littering his woolen clothing. "The scouts - they've spotted an armada. Very far away, but like the spy said. And dragons-" he gasped suddenly, out of breath. "The Night Fury is fighting on the west side."

She reigned in her horse, alarmed at the news. "How far away, the ships?"

"At least a day. Maybe more. They're against the wind."

She leaned over, directed a few men to ready for the impending bloodshed. She turned to the messenger again. "And the Night Fury?"

"One of the men saw a Night Fury fighting with a Skrill by the Wold Caves."

"And the boy?"

"With them."

She reigned in the horse, jerked her head to her people. "Ready your nets, men. We're taking back the Fury." She slapped her legs against her horse, set off through the woods. Even here she could imagine hearing those dragons screaming at each other. It was real, and if what the messenger was saying was true, then that story by Hervi was real. She'd always wondered. Night Furies were legendary here. Her father had found the bones of a Night Fury long ago, that terrible beast, when he first came here some twenty years ago. And wasn't it in that place too? That hill she was heading for now, the caves of Wold. Hervi had shown him, and they'd collected the scales, made gleaming black helmets out of them.

And if Stoick's ships were coming and Hiccup was here . . . She still didn't know why the boy was in her presence, on her island. It was as if Fate was laughing at her, a battle she'd picked out with her, to spite her.

The whisper of that day in Berk came back, that night in Hiccup's room, when she watched him sleeping and almost thrust the blade into his heart. The moonlight was very white suddenly, and stark in the night. She inhaled the coldness of the night, closed her eyes and opened them again. She couldn't be afraid now, could she? A thought entered her mind, a kind of plan, and she knew it was because the honest truth was that she was afraid to kill him again.

Because he was the dragon trainer after all, as the stories had said, the dragon whisperer. Maybe, maybe she didn't have to face that

again, those wide eyes, full of green and wonder, and . . .
innocence.

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"Toothless-!"

Hiccup gasped underneath the body of the Night Fury. He tried to move, found his friend's grip around him tight and convicted. The cold stone of the cave was hard against his back, and he yelped, tried to get Toothless' attention to the fact that he was hurting now, his shoulder having deftly realized it was twisting in a not-so-desirable position. "Toothless, buddy-"

The dragon above him hissed, wasn't paying attention to him right now. Hiccup could hear the Skrill up ahead of him, he could feel the vibration in the ground, the sharp tear of claws against the rock, thin echoes in the darkness. And down here, his head on the rocks, something moist making his cheek cold, he could hear the scatter of creatures, lizards and beetles, hurry past him, down into the depth of the cave, the faint glow of the cave creatures drifting down, somewhere on the other side of Toothless' legs and wings. The cold seeped in between the dragon, licked at him in the mixed heat from the angry Night Fury above him. Hiccup had never felt Toothless so heated. This was serious, this war between them. How could so much hatred flame up so quickly?

And then the pulse of plasma. Hiccup winced, could feel the fire churn in Toothless' body. He had to get out there, intervene somehow. "Buddy, let me go-"

Toothless hissed, shoved forward slightly, rubbing Hiccup against the rock. Hiccup sucked in a breath, pushed up with his good arm, afraid to use the other one. Toothless couldn't fly, and trying to protect him, he couldn't move either. Both of them would get killed this way. Hiccup shoved his hand up Toothless' middle. The Skrill was scratching the ground now, and there was a buzz of lightning sounds. Hiccup forced his hand up harder. If they had to fight, he had to fight with Toothless. Didn't his friend remember that? They did it together.

Toothless jerked suddenly, to Hiccup's motion, and pressed harder down, shrieking at the dragon ahead of him. Hiccup felt the pulse of lightning in the air, the rush and cackle of white fire, and he looked down, past his feet and through the membranes of Toothless' wings, saw the light bouncing, flooding past the ground. Hiccup locked his jaw, firmed both palms on the stone, his injury notwithstanding, and shoved himself downward, under Toothless, and behind him. He whirled up, saw the black silhouette of the Skrill, a moment before he fired, lighting up the cavern as like midday. Toothless growled, a sharp piercing hiss, and turned suddenly, to face Hiccup. "Toothless- stop," Hiccup gasped, dropping forward, to the right of the dragon, kneeling and putting his hand out to his friend. Toothless jumped back suddenly, stared at Hiccup with a white shock, yelped in fear. The Skrill hissed, cackled in an almost laugh, and snaked up towards them, dark wings jabbing down towards the stone, the claws white and sharp on the ground. Toothless jumped forward suddenly, between the Skrill and Hiccup, that conviction in his step and then the fire in those glowing Skrill eyes - the words to the death snapped through Hiccup's mind and he screamed, jumped

forward, white fire in the air suddenly, cold and sparking in Hiccup's nerves. He yelled, found his metal leg shivering, the stone under his feet, a river of lightning rushing past him, and the dark cavern suddenly snapping in his vision, flickering white and- suddenly a force against him, a hard warm body, something clamping over him, and he looked down before the thought solidified in his mind- saw that dark spiked dragon's head latched to his body, the jaw around him, and suddenly his feet slipped off the ground. The dragon whipped his head, pressed his jaws down into Hiccup. A gasp escaped him, and he jabbed his hands out, found his left one stuck in the corner of the dragon's jaw. The saliva soaked over him, that icky dragon goo. The teeth jagged down like a thousand pinpricks digging deeper and wider into his skin. No, _no_- he shouted. He'd never planned to die by ingestion. Sometimes he had all the luck.

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Toothless blasted a volley of fire as he skidded on the cave floor. Plasma ripped through the tunnel. The Skrill squawked and spiked wings jumped out of the fire's path. A sudden flash of lightning shot back and Toothless sparked and fired - kept firing, over, again, over, and again, the blasts pummeling into the cave walls in blinding succession. The chamber quaked, rock fragmented and crashed. Toothless paused to see past the light's brilliant wake.

But Skari was gone. There was a fast streak past him, a shrill screech. Toothless turned and screamed at the shape, prepared to fire again, but in a moment his fire died in his throat, for the vision that met his eyes. His boy, Skari had taken him, and Hiccup was writhing and fighting in the jaws of that dragon.

Hate filled the darkest corner of Toothless' soul. How dare he touch him. He lunged at the Skrill. Skari pitched sideways, but Toothless' claws struck into the Skrill's back and the Night Fury held on. Hiccup shouted, Skari yelped, bucked wildly and suddenly those long spines slashed into Toothless' belly. "_No_-" Hiccup yelled. Toothless roared as the flailing body under him turned over, and him with it. Toothless found himself upside down on his back, spines cutting into him, and he bit back at the points, struck his legs out and let out a roar. The heaving body suddenly lifted from him and he breathed out, angled his head and caught sight of Skari flying out of the cave. But Hiccup-

Toothless jumped up and ran. He collided into the harsh emptiness of the night, his jaws biting air and his eyes searching up-

The Skrill let out a laugh of syllables in his growl from the air. _Dagr you fool._

Skari hovered, Hiccup's small shape hanging, fighting between his teeth. He was kicking, he was afraid. Toothless stopped breathing, panic ripping through him. He knew Hiccup, and he knew his boy was never afraid.

Suddenly the Skrill heaved a breath and jabbed his jaws forward. Skari flicked his prey in the air and caught him again in his mouth, like a fish freshly snagged and toyed with. Hiccup's movement ebbed and his legs went limp for a moment. An unearthly fire tore through the Night Fury's heart and he roared at the Skrill, a hot, angry roar filled with all the trapped hate that longed to fly up to that

monster and swirl down and away into the spiral of death and final comeuppance.

Toothless leapt up and slammed his wings into the air, but the Skrill only flew higher as Toothless plunged to the ground screaming. Skari gurgled in mockery at him, lifted his spiked wings and began flying over the meadow, Toothless running after him.

_Chasing after your boy . . . _The Skrill tilted the words in his silky growl.

_Fight me, coward. _Toothless' guttural hiss was low and sharp.

_. . . clever escape you had from the humans . . . _

Shut up Skari-

_. . . too bad you won't make it off the island . . . _

I'll soak the dirt with your blood.

Skari stopped in mid-air, his body turning, his eyes flashing down at him. He hissed one more time, the words low and deep in his throat. _Only a Night Fury will die tonight._

Skari flapped forward. Toothless hissed, a thousand shards of rage and bloodlust burning through his chest. A sudden fear welled up above his fury, a fear for Hiccup, and with those words ringing in his head, _he'll use him against you, Dagr._

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Astrid had a notion it would come to this. Heather and her maniacal crew, here in the forest, chasing down Hiccup and Toothless. While she'd been running towards that cave with Toothless' voice in it, she'd seen them, on horses and running after the dragons. So much for the cover of night and the escape. No wonder those guys were late. She should not have trusted Fishlegs, she _should_ have thought the worst, and she wouldn't have to be grasping at straws now, running, jumping over crawling vines and branches and hoping she wasn't too late.

"Hiccup!" she screamed. This wasn't a time for being quiet. She'd seen glimpses of the dragon holding him up, and Toothless chasing after him. She'd never seen such a thing before, and she was scared to death that this was going to be the end for Hiccup. What untrained dragon pulled that stunt without something lethal in mind?

She didn't care that Fishlegs was falling behind, on his stubby legs, yelping after her. She couldn't wait any more. Those Skirra VÃ©llites were ahead of her. They'd seen the dragon and the boy, and they'd have no mercy. They wanted the Night Fury for some ceremony, and they wanted Hiccup dead. But she wasn't about to let either happen, not if she could help it. Fishlegs was far behind her now, still scampering through the undergrowth. She almost didn't want him involved. Someone had to stay on the outside, if what she had to do failed.

The woods were opening up now, into a field of brown, sticky mud and bare pines, as if they had been scorched some time long ago, and huge puckered rocks in the murky mud afar, boulders jagged and

volcanic.

Heather's horses and men were only a few dozen yards from her now, just on the edge of the forest. Several were dismounted, hauling themselves into the mud, armed with a net with rocks attached to the corners. The Skrill with Hiccup was flapping ridiculously close to the ground, with Toothless splashing through the muck, those eyes angry and very much the vicious Night Fury that he was. She yelled, a cold, chilling battle cry and let all the anger she knew lived inside of her spill out in a vent of war. Pounding through the last edges of the forest, preparing herself. The time of careful caution was over. If she didn't do something now, there wouldn't be a second chance. So maybe Hiccup had a point in being rash.

She had no weapon, no axe, and no dragon, but men had faced worse odds before. Didn't they?

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It wasn't so much the moment that scared him most but the pain he knew was coming. "Get me- off," Hiccup gasped, gritted his teeth when he felt the sink of those jagged teeth into his abdomen. The jaws of the Skrill were locked around him, as he faced upward and his legs dangled into the air on the Skrill's left side. He barely kept conscious, the shock of the situation doubled with the crackled hum of lightning thick in the air. Was this guy going to chop him down? Dragons didn't eat people, did they? Oh suffering scallops . .

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He felt his hair raise on end, his skin crawl with a thousand creeping dagger points up and down his arm and leg. What the dragon lightning would do to him, he could only venture to guess. His prosthetic sparked, and the skin there was strangely chilled, like a pulsing shot of ice morphing to fire and back again to cold. The dragon snapped his jaw, and Hiccup hissed a gasp, the fresh cuts on his body competing for attention from his left shoulder, which found no pleasure in its forced position between the dragon's jaws.

"Aaargh-" He pulled his right arm up, slapped it onto the thin snout of the Skrill. He pushed, bent over and looked down-

Some moments must have passed between the time the Skrill grabbed him and now, for he found himself in the air, some forty feet up, Toothless jumping into the sky, crawling up trees, leaping at them, desperation in his eyes and a horrid, hateful growl in his throat. "Toothless-!" Hiccup shrieked, catching his breath as the Skrill threw his head up and sank his jaws tighter together. Hiccup felt his eyesight waver, and something more vital than mere dragon saliva soaking through him. He exhaled forcefully, pushed again on the dragon's snout. What was this creature? He focused his eyes on it, saw the thin evil in its eye, that very sane determination, and looking down at Toothless with a sort of communicative knowledge in them.

He had the sudden notion that the Skrill wasn't going to eat him alive.

Those dragons were humming to each other now, hot angry growls and sharp piercing hisses and jabs. He was the ploy in this feud now,

wasn't he? Some kind of bait for Toothless. But- bait for what?

The Skrill hissed suddenly, jolted up and dived down, that piercing howl in his lungs, as he swept near Toothless, jabbed his jaws at the Night Fury. Hiccup winced, his breath jagged and rasping. He could hear Toothless yelp up at him, that hurt in his voice, mingled with hate, down below him. "Toothless-" He pushed the panic down inside of him. If the Skrill had the upper hand here, if Toothless . . . his mind ran madly, his breathing got fast. He had to figure this out.

He tried to slide up, but leaning over was too painful, and the Skrill banked suddenly, over the tops of pine groves on the edges of the flat grassy strip of land widening out from a thin parcel north of the cave. A panic throbbed through him, suddenly. Where was he going? The beat of the spiked wings undulated beneath him, as the cold night of the air pierced beneath his clothes. If Toothless knew him once, and this feud . . . if only he could understand, if only he could speak to them, and maybe there was a peaceful way to end this madness. He had his right hand free, and with it he jabbed hard at the head of the Skrill, felt almost awful for doing that to a dragon. He shivered, in the cold and the wash of fear and uncertainty, and his eye caught a golden light on the ground amidst the black, blue forest bathed in silver moonlight. He yelled, instinct telling him to call for help, to whoever it was with that torchlight. The jabs of pain in his middle flared up again, as a breath of blue smoke drifted out of the Skrill's snout and the dragon laughed suddenly, a gargle of pleasure as he swept down again, towards the stolid treetops of the forest. The motion made him dizzy suddenly, and he blacked out a moment, heard the sound of Toothless yelping for him, crying out in a knowing desperation. The next moment he opened his eyes, head lolling to the side. He could see his friend running behind the Skrill, who was strangely flying low, through the tree trunks in the dense forest, deft and agile, dodging right, left, jerking upwards and sweeping low. This dragon lived here a long time, and knew the path. Toothless fell behind, but always, he was there leaping over the next brambly bush and cluster of ferns and fallen, rotting branches.

Hiccup gasped in a breath of cold air, jabbed his right hand up the Skrill's jaw again, found it hard to get a grip now, and with the teeth still lodged inside him, movement was not exactly your most painless endeavor. And then there was that orange light again, in the woods. He turned up and looked, saw the silhouette of horses, dark and clustered, somewhere in the distance, past a clearing in the woods just coming up- the Skrill broke out of the forest, into the large clearing, filled with dirt and glistening mud beneath, bordered by forest again, and a messy, watery swamp at the end of it, with the river wide and fast beyond. He pressed up in the jaws again, got the Skrill to notice. The dragon jolted, flapped both wings forward, swept backward, hovered, shook his head and the prey within. The dizziness hit Hiccup again, and in the confused mingled reality in his mind, he thought he heard Astrid, screaming something, in the distance, below. It felt so real, and yet . . . like a dream. He inhaled again, deeper, longer, blinked and was blinded by the clear, bright moon. Sight whitened for a moment, he felt only pain, and a strange surreal weightlessness, here in the air. He had to get out of here, he wasn't going to be able to take this much longer. His legs spasmed suddenly, and he heard a slosh in the mud beneath, Toothless yelping, screaming. "Buddy . . . help," he gasped, letting off his

hand on the Skrill's jaw, tightening his own jaw as the force of the dragon sweeping down again got to him, as he heard that laugh in the dragon's lungs, the cold pitch penetrating into Hiccup's bones.

He opened his eyes, heard Astrid again, looked down and saw the horses, with the riders, their hands glistening with swords and axes and standing back, the lead horse small and black, with a familiar form on it - even from here, with the dizziness and a growing numbness messing up his senses, he could read the figure of that girl. Like when he first saw her on that ship, her cape flowing in the ocean breezes and her hair flapping black and long in the wind. They were running, on those horses, towards them below, like some small army of riders with torches and glistening swords. He inhaled again, winced shut his eyes and opened them, felt something change with the dragon holding him, a pause in the flapping, and then a scream from the dragon's gut. The Skrill turned back, looking down and Hiccup knew somehow it was a stare at Toothless following below him. But this pause?

The Strike class was an intelligent species. And the Skrill had a hateful vengeance for Toothless. This was where he was taking Hiccup. In a horrid vision of the future, he knew why he'd become bait.

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Hiccup was screaming now. "Toothless-!-"

Toothless lifted his head up, but he couldn't take his eyes off the people, the glint of metal rushing into view from the forest's darkness-

"It's a trap." That urgency. Toothless growled. He knew that, he knew what the Skrill was doing now, but he didn't run. He stood still in the wet ground under him, his chest beating fast. Skari paused in the air above him. A deliberate pause, a pause fully aware of the sudden appearance of humans from the forest's edge, men armed with axes and swords and arrows - dragon hunters.

"Toothless, come back for me later, just-"

Toothless snorted. He could deal with this_{..} He shifted his body, caught sight of humans on his right and ahead of him. A horde amassing, edging into the open space, the slosh of their steps into the mud awful and disgusting, and the clap and clang of their weapons suddenly sharp and loud. So this was what Skari led him to. He bared his teeth and flattened his ears against his skull, wrath exploding in his soul.

Ruthless little things, those dragon slayers. Skari's gritting hiss. As my brother could tell you, it's nasty business being the prize dragon.

Toothless twisted underneath Skari's shadow, a sudden clarity hitting him, sparking horror, disgust. He snarled. You meant them to find me.

Didn't think you'd run into dragon killers all by yourself . .

.-

Getting men to do your dirty work-

_They're already dirty. Invading what's not theirs, killing what's not theirs to kill . . . _

Skari flapped lower, his wingbeats cold and biting. He hissed.

. . . just like you, Dagr. Like your father, like all Night Furies. You thought you could take this island, kill every one of us-

-you know NOTHING about my father, or me. A surge of gas welled up in Toothless' throat. Instinct was not something he was used to pushing aside. He'd have sent that Skrill begging for his life, but Hiccup was there-

"Get _out_ of here buddy-"

-and he kept it back. He could hear men breathing fast and near him, the men coming close. Hiccup needed him, and he needed him now. He whirled up and screamed at the Skrill, the language thick in his throat. _Skari, you got what you wanted._ _Go watch me die-_

_I fully intend to . . . _

-you don't need the boy anymore.

. . . is he so precious to you?

He's not part of this-

. . . worth more than your life to you?

"Toothless, listen to me!"

He is the enemy-

HICCUP-

They who capture us-

Let him GO-

. . . enslave us-

"Leave _now. Buddy-!_"

. . . kill us-

Never, Hiccup.

You're selfish, Dagr.

Toothless blinked, couldn't believe what he'd just been accused of. He let the impatient explosion of plasma out of his throat. He aimed below Hiccup for the Skrill's belly. But Skari dipped sideways, and the plasma missed, glowing bright and surreal in the black sky. Toothless snarled and Skari hissed a sticky chime of laughter. The Skrill rose into the night, so high Hiccup was only a shadow, and the Skrill only a wild and shrieking voice of hate. _You've sided with our murderers. You are a traitor. And as a traitor, you must die._

Skari slammed his wings low, swept over the people, and heaved his body down. The men shouted, the dragon diving overhead, and suddenly, the Skrill threw Hiccup down, down into the mass of people and axes and glistening swords. Toothless could hear Hiccup screaming, the Skrill laughing, and he lunged forward, towards the warriors. For a moment he knew exactly what the Skrill had intended, but this time he didn't care.

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The impact of Hiccup's body on the ground made him black out for a moment. He shouted, doubled over in the shards of pain that stabbed him fresh. The Skrill might have released him, but it wasn't in the most human-friendly manner. But this was all part of that dragon's plan. Mud sucked around him, and he sloshed his one hand in, trying to get a grip.

"Toothless-!"

He gasped the name, as a panic swept through him. Toothless was in danger. That's what the Skrill wanted. After all, he had nothing against Hiccup personally, did he? Hiccup's eyes shot open, and he was met with a sight of swords and axes in his face, scattered around him and heavy shoes running everywhere. Somewhere he could hear the Skrill's scream and the sound of arrows flying into the air, and the squelch of that dragon's body into the ground, more yelling, and the hot breath of dragon screams doubled and thick in the night.

He groped in the sloshing dirt again, felt arms reach down and begin to grab him. He fought back, weakly. It was chaos, whatever was going on. He tried to get upright, but his own side stopped him, and he fell back on the soft dirt. That girl's voice he heard, it was screaming now, so close and now he knew it was real. It was _Astrid._ "Astrid?" he gasped, barely audible to himself, as a hand grabbed him. He slapped it away, heard Toothless growling, screeching in a different kind of hatred. He looked between the running feet and saw that familiar netting swimming over the wet earth, the large black silhouette underneath it, thickly-clad Vikings around him, shapes so familiar in his time. Dragon hunters, dragon catchers, dragon killers. That's what the Skrill wanted when he threw him in here. He knew Toothless was so loyal to him that he'd follow him anywhere.

"No!" he screamed. "_No! Stop it-_" His voice choked on him, and those arms hauled him up out of the dirt, pulled on him. His jaw locked, his whole body hurting, and the screaming voice of Astrid mingling into an inhuman yell, a battle cry of one lone girl. Some foreign sense of inspiration struck him and he told himself to _do something_. He threw his left arm back, grunted to compensate for the pain, stepped forward as the man behind him jolted back to the surprise elbow punch. Hiccup gasped, went for Toothless just a few yards from him, those Skirra VÃ©llites thick around him. He looked back briefly, saw Astrid kicking up her feet and cartwheeling in the muddy black landscape. She had a grown man's sword in her hand and there was a cluster of fallen, injured men behind her, getting up from the brown muck. What was she _doing?_" Astrid, behind you!" he yelled, and hesitated. Astrid was going to get murdered there, doing such a stupid thing as taking on a whole pack of the enemy single-handedly. She whirled at his words, kicked the warrior behind

her. "Astrid, get out of here!" He turned back to Toothless, found a horse in his path suddenly, rearing and spitting mud from his hooves, blocking him from his dragon. He could hear Toothless fighting, those claws scratching at something metal, and a hiss of anger and defiance. Hiccup slid down, into the mud and under the horse as it slapped down again. He clawed the ground on his hands, found the end of the net and grabbed it, jerked it back, adrenaline flowing fresh and white in his veins. Toothless was trapped in between the lines, the mess of rope looked impossible, he pulled again, desperate, looked back and saw Astrid, still fighting, her yells and shouts strong and forceful. "Astrid-" he shouted, not knowing what to say, panicking with a very real fear. These people didn't fear killing, of men or dragons. "Astrid!" Someone was coming at him now, dark shapes who figured out this thin intruder was trying to mess with the prize dragon. He curved his hand behind him, lashed out the dagger from his belt, snapped the net and yelled for Astrid again. "Get over here!" he shouted and threw his arms into the opening in the net he'd created. "Buddy, jump!" Toothless leaped forward, and then the dark shapes reached him. Hands heavy and hot grabbed him, swept around his neck and shoulders, almost choking him. Another female voice, commanding and strong, broke through and yelled, "Don't kill him!"

Toothless jumped for him, and Hiccup tried to tell him, the words garbled now in the big man's grip. "_Go Toothless! Run! Get- out of here!_" The man pulled on him, made his legs drag in the slopping mud. Toothless jumped after him but the men were prepared. Another net came flying down and yells of war clamped down on Hiccup's ears. Some dark figure threw himself on Toothless' head, and the dragon's snout disappeared into the mucky darkness of the mud. There was a laughing dragon's scream somewhere far away, and Hiccup shouted, his voice muffled in the grip of his captor. "Let him go! Let Toothless go-" He couldn't see anymore, the arm so thick and hard around him. And Astrid- _Astrid!_ He heard her. "Get your _filthy_ hands off-!"

"Astrid!" Hiccup managed to gasp. No, don't let her get in this mess, too, he prayed desperately. Toothless' blood on his hands was enough. Not Astrid's too. He struggled against the tight hold on him, fought with everything he had in his small frame, and _almost_ got to slide past, but then that woman's voice, it sounded deep and strangely mature now- above him and biting. "Hiccup Horrendous Haddock," it gasped out in a horrid sense of hate and spitting revulsion. He stopped, it was Heather. He was thrown into the ground suddenly, face down, and he hit the wet mud with a shocked gasp. Those wounds in his body screamed out at him suddenly, and he inhaled sharply. He could feel men around him, surrounding him on every side. Boots slapped down in front of him and mud spat out from under them, squeezed and sucked in and out with her every step towards him. He heard a sword unsheathe and looked up, squinting in the moon that shone somewhere behind Heather's black, silhouetted face and that hair flying ragged and silky in the night air. Her blade glimmered in her right hand, its point to the ground, just above the dirt and grime below her, her cape dark and flapping behind her.

He held his breath, tried to get a hand down to get up, felt the blade's flat edge against his left shoulder suddenly, pressing down. He winced, inhaled again and heard a muffled cry afar, it was Astrid and he got a grip with his right hand on the solid earth somewhere below him, looked out to his right, saw Astrid in the tight grip of

three bulky men, her limbs still fighting, kicking, as she spat hot curses in her captor's faces.

"Look at me," said the voice above him, and he glanced up, saw Heather leaning down to him, blocking out the moon, that blade sliding down his back and the end jabbing into the back of his harness under his muddy, stained fur vest.

His breath increased and he exhaled hotly. "Let her go," he said, calmly, the anger in him at a boiling point. "You can have me, but don't you touch her."

"I'm not after your girlfriend," she said, and the tone in her voice sickened Hiccup. His lips curved into a grimace and once again he tried to get up. Heather grabbed the lace of his collar suddenly, jerked him to his feet and held him close to her, her dark glimmering eyes piercing into his, a shiver in them, like . . . evil, or was it apprehension?

He swallowed, and she whispered, low and quiet. "You've always been known for changing fate, haven't you?"

He didn't answer.

"Well, haven't you?" Her voice rose, shaking.

"What do you mean?" He cleared his throat. Somewhere afar he could hear the shrill yelp of a dragon - the Skrill, it wasn't Toothless, and he looked out quickly, saw the same netting over that dragon, warriors clamoring over him as they had on Toothless.

"I'm not speaking in riddles," she hissed, and he looked back at her. "I mean the curse we had on you. You're supposed to be an embarrassment, a sick blight in your family." She eyed her warriors around suddenly, and he felt a deft sense of solitude surround them. They'd backed away, just enough to be private, not enough to relinquish caution. Their axes reflected white and blue in the moonlight. Heather dropped to a whisper again and looked at him. "I just got word that Stoick is near, that his armada is preparing for war on us."

"What?" Hiccup caught his breath.

"Don't act like you didn't know." She pulled him in closer, whispered angry now. He caught his breath, the shoulder screaming, his body shaking. "Your spies told us," she spat, "and we've confirmed it."

He swallowed, couldn't believe it. The spies, the kids of course, they didn't know if his Dad was coming or not, he didn't know.

"My scouts have seen the ships," she continued, letting up the pressure on his collar. "He's not an easy man to beat."

His breath heaved harder, and he didn't blink, kept his stare on her. She whirled her other hand, and the sword in it flashed again in the moon. She looked behind him, her eyes suddenly avoiding his. A twitch in her face, and she forced her eyes on him again, but this time he could sense a hesitation. It was slight, but it was there. She bounced the sword in her hand, and suddenly lashed its edge up to his

throat. He caught his breath.

Her eyes steadied on him. "I- I won't kill you," she said, a surprising unsteadiness in her voice, "on one condition. That you train our dragons."

His mouth fell open and he almost said something, but- was it what he thought it meant? If they meant . . . "I'm not training any dragons," he said, firmly, his mouth dry.

She swallowed and pressed the blade closer. It almost dug in, but she brought it out suddenly, brought the sword down and turned her eyes away, as if she were . . . scared of something. The shiver in his heart ebbed, and the hand on his collar tightened and she looked out briefly, before focusing on him again. She locked her eyes on him, a forced conviction in them now. "You lived when you weren't supposed to. You're here when you should be dead and gone." She hissed the last words into his face, her lips close to his, her eyes so close and sparkling black in the moonlight behind her. He breathed hard, the pangs of pain in his body growing harder and harder to ignore. "You're going to train our army. You--" She latched her fingers around his collar. "You are going to create the army that will defeat my father's brother."

A horror filled him, an emotion greater than his pain. "Never-" he gasped.

She lisped, her lips shaking suddenly. "I said I'd kill you, if you don't."

He inhaled again, kept his eyes on those shining black ones, ones so close. There was something in them besides hate now, and he couldn't understand it. But what she was asking him to do-

"Then . . ." He swallowed, his mouth so dry and aching. "I'll die first before that happens." He raised his chin, still looking at her. Her eyes wavered, and the tightness of her brow shook suddenly. The stare held, and the pain started getting to him now, in the midst of the horror and the fear, and the conviction that was running through him like adrenaline fast and frigid in his nerves. He gasped in a breath, clasped his right arm around his middle, broke the stare as he squeezed shut his eyes.

"Take him to the execution chamber," he heard her say, above him, and those big heavy arms grabbed him again. He shrieked in the agony that hit him now, gritted his teeth and heard somewhere so close the voice of Astrid screaming, shouting, desperate and afraid.

"Hiccup- Hiccup!"

28. Chapter 24: A Treacherous Choice

a/n: We're starting Act 3 (of 4) on quite a dark note. We based some things from Viking culture, with variation of our own and on the Cressida Cowell books.

It literally takes a week to write each chapter, I timed myself this time, and this was with no schooling and me pushing aside everything to get this done! All week I was like, muse this is a scene I've

been anticipating for ****MONTHS****, get your act together._

And my muse would be all ****NOPE****. So. Battle of the muse and the writer. XD I'm just one of those people whose inspiration comes in bursts. Bad for me! Ah, well, what can I do? When I write without the muse I know I'm faking it. So anyway, hope you like what we have to offer this time. Enjoy!

View the illustration at the official webpage. Put a period where the dashes are: howtotrainyourdragon2 - thecomicseries - com
>or at my deviantArt gallery: inhonoredglory - deviantart - gallery - 38855965<p>

* * *

><p>How to Train Your Dragon II
>The Dragon Whisperer

****Act III******
>****A Friendship Tested****

****Chapter 24******
>*****A Treacherous Choice****
>

"No, no no _NO!_"

Fishlegs sputtered and almost tripped the fifth time on one too many conspiring tree roots. His legs were too short and the forest was too big. The dragon screeches were fading already, the shouts of men dimming with the distance, and with it, dwindled his last fragments of hope. He didn't know what happened - he was _too late_ to prevent whatever happened from happening. Gosh it was all his fault. Sure, Astrid was better at this sort of thing than he was, he couldn't catch up with her anyway to fight the Skirra VÃ©l without a weapon and without his Meatlug. The plan had failed, his friends were captured, and he was utterly alone.

"I hate this," he moaned, put a hand over his mouth at the close clatter of metal against metal striking beyond, in the black tangle of trees. He gritted his teeth and kept running parallel to the sound, a continual thudding of moving bodies not too far. His bare arms stung with the slap of branches, and he wasn't all too certain their wasn't some nasty bog nearby ready to swallow his ankles in muck. If only he had Meatlug - dear, poor Meatlug. He lost his friend helping Hiccup save his dragon, and now, was there no one left to do the saving?

If Hiccup and Toothless couldn't outrun them, if Astrid couldn't outfight them . . . he gulped. What chance did an Ingerman have?

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Few things took place on the island of Herkja that commanded so much attention as the escape and recapture of the enemy's son and the greatest dragon the area had ever seen. Children stayed up and wandered the streets, curious not only with the wild dragons caged in their midst, but with the rushing mass of warriors that they had not seen for months, and of course with the news that the enemy was among them, children at that. It made for news. For the older people, who

speculated that the enemy might be coming near, it made for nervousness and for others, a brash defiance. Local meade halls overflowed with old men lifting their mugs. "May justice be done!" And curious women's eyes watched the men, their hearts alive with fear and excitement at the thoughts of upcoming battle. "Not on our island?" "My husband would never let such scum win." "Your husband? Bah, mine shall eat the brutes for breakfast!" And they laughed, herded their young ones into the homes. "But what if we lose?" would ask one, but the Skirra VÃ©l were a confident folk, and few asked such questions.

But in the houses of the slaves, there was always a hope. War might mean the end of their tribe, but the choice was whether one thought of themselves as a part of the tribe or not. Some, the older members of the unfree, loved the land, had sacrificed so much to save her. Others, newcomers, fresh from the mainland with new languages, foreign religions, odd customs, they had no love for this place, no love for their captors, and no reason not to rise up and rebel, except for the punishment that kept all slaves docile.

Iggy had caught a sickness, from one of the many slaves with him, Hervi believed, and the old slave took it upon himself to remove him from the rest of them and tend to his illness. Noor cocked her head at him, as he entered Rune Haddock's slave house, and Hervi knew she was questioning his logic on this.

"He was sick," he said simply, his arms full of the spirited child. Hervi was respected in the village, even among the rest of the townsfolk, and he could use his own sense of negotiation to get his way often. The guards at the slavepen could hardly turn him down. Besides, it was only until the child was well, and would the masters even notice? What with the war coming?

Iggy coughed, let out a big grin. "I'd be fine, honest."

"No, Iggy-" Hervi sighed, turning from Noor and walking past the central fire pit in the small structure. Noor mumbled curses in her native tongue, wiped her hands forcefully on her dirty apron. Hervi smirked, lay the boy down on his cot, covered him in a blanket. Iggy smiled up, his lips thin and he coughed again, blinked and wiped his eyes. "I'll get you some soup." He patted his old, wrinkled hand on the child's forehead, stepped away. Noor was taking a pot out already, knowing his intent. She glanced at him, a homey criticalness in her sharp black eyes.

He swallowed. "You've heard that they captured the Hooligan boy, haven't you?"

Noor stopped, looked at him with those wide, innocent eyes. She blinked, nudged her head down, clicked her tongue critically.

Hervi bit his lip, took a poker and shoved the embers around in the fire pit. "I have to check on him, with the Blood Daggers." A pressure formed in his throat and he coughed into his fist lightly. He never looked forward to finding the victims of the executions. Those dragons usually picked them to the bone, and even then, sometimes more. There often wasn't much to come back to. But just a boy, just a young man, and so innocent . . . Why did Heather have to do it? He looked up from the fire, to Iggy, his little fingers playing with the blanket on him. Sometimes he hated her.

:: ::

I'm not going to die. I can't let this happen.

The thoughts ran wild in his head, made the journey back to the town a whirlwind of nonsense, and a blur of burning torches orange and almost white against the dark black of the town. Hiccup was thrown over the back of some warrior's horse, his tired legs dangling off the left side, bound hands hanging down to the horse's legs. The pressure on his abdomen helped somewhat to ease the pain there, but his shoulder, warped as it was now, gave him no rest. He fought the urge to scream at every pounding step of the horse's gate. He was getting delirious now, in that sudden raging pain, he could tell in the few scraps of consciousness that still held him. Sleeplessness, fear, a torture of pain, and the waning adrenaline, it all conspired against him, and he wanted to fight, wanted to slide off maybe and make a run for it, but he knew his body wouldn't let him. He thought he heard Astrid, still screaming, and Toothless, his unmistakable growl yelping in a moan that was meant for him, calling to him - but, later, as the air warmed with the glow of fire, and the hum of people in voices he couldn't hear, Astrid's voice was gone and Toothless, he thought he heard him, but didn't have the strength to look up and see. For a moment he thought maybe he'd end up dying right here and now, on the back of the horse, before being executed at all. The image of his father faded into his confused mind suddenly, and he didn't know what to say to him.

I- I'm sorry, Dad . . .

The horse halted suddenly and he sighed, let his arms hang down, the pain all the same no matter what he did. Gruff hands slid him off the animal, and he felt the ground hit him suddenly, snap against his right shoulder blade as he rolled onto his back. The faces above him were dark and ugly, different with the uniqueness of individuals, but human? Suddenly those faces looked like stone, hard, cold, and heartless.

"Why?" he tried to say, but nothing choked out of his parched throat. The next thing he knew they were pulling him to his feet, dragging him towards that stone structure where he'd just come from to free Toothless. Doors opened and he felt the vast open circle of this ring, the pungent smell of alcohol-hinted smoke sparking into his lungs. Astrid, where had they taken her? And Toothless- _no, please not_. He looked up suddenly, saw in a moment of sanity a line of faces above the walls, watching him, some of those eyes full of hate, some of shock, of surprise, and a few of curiosity. There was a familiar figure, that girl in town he'd met, and he looked away, the effort to stare too much for his eyes.

Another stone door opened before him and they threw him in, the cold stone of the corridor sharp against his weak body. Some foreign ugly smell came coughing up into his lungs, like mold and things decaying, and a stale dirty water lapping up his face, before someone pulled him up again and he tried to get a grip on the ground with his foot and metal leg. He was sliding, the pain almost a monotony now, and the tunnel was dark and cold, lonely and thick with the hum of captured dragons. He forced a clarity into his mind, felt a sharp hurt to see them like this, for these people didn't care about the dragons, they just wanted them for war. He gasped out something

unintelligible, even to him, and they yanked at him again, on his arms that could barely take it anymore. It was all a blur, pain and fear and a fighting spirit that had almost been beat to the ground.

"_No_," he yelled at last, jabbing his arms sideways, setting the men off balance. The faint torch light in the tunnel wavered in his vision, and he could barely see beyond the darkness ahead. The man on his left snarled suddenly, jerked Hiccup close to him. "Shut up, brat, we know what you've done." He pushed Hiccup forward again and the ground slipped under him. Hiccup yelped as he slid down, let out a scream when the stone collided with the front of his right shoulder.

"Hiccup-"

Hiccup winced, his mind reacting to the sound of his name, in a familiar voice, the cold rock against his face, but the arms grabbed him again and he was pulled up. He looked out, frantically, for the owner of that voice. It was Ruffnut- where?

"What's happening? Hey-!"

Tuffnut, now, an anger in his voice, and the man on Hiccup's right lashed an arm out behind him, gruffly turned back. "What's it to you?"

"He's our friend, what are you doing to him?" said Tuffnut again, insulted and hot.

"You're _hurt_-_!_" Snotlout's voice, shocked.

Hiccup raised his head, the immense effort to do so surprising him. He caught sight of them, behind metal bars in one of the cells that lined this whole place. Before he could say anything, they pushed him forward again, into the darkness and the descending passage. Hiccup choked out something, knew it was too late for them to hear him, and besides, what good would it do? He felt like falling, fainting dead away and just letting whatever would happen to him be over and happened. Whatever now, he just wanted a past tense to things like hurting and hopelessness, fighting back and pushing on. But it wasn't hopeless. Was it? There was always hope. He gasped in a breath, looked out, but it was dark now, even the torchlights behind him in the tunnel back there were fading. The dragon hissing and hums were distant now, and he could only sense them, like ever-present ghosts in the air, he could feel them watching the harried passage of this lone figure into the darkness, and somehow he could feel their fear, as if something ahead was frightening even to them. A chill ran up Hiccup's nerves, and he pushed away those impressions in the back of his mind. Sometimes knowing dragons so well didn't do you very good, if you didn't want to believe what you were feeling.

What was down there anyway?

There was a creak suddenly, and his feet found the ground get uneven, like jagged, unsanded rocks, still part of the larger cavern, but hardly traversed by feet . . . in a long while, he ventured to suppose. There was a new coldness, and a different air suddenly, clammy and salty. He sniffed and knew there was water down there. The man on his right let go suddenly, stepped forward in the darkness.

Water splashed and its crisp sound made Hiccup shiver.

"They're ready," said the man in the darkness, and the man behind Hiccup grabbed both his shoulders and shoved him forward. Water splashed and the frigid liquid drenched up Hiccup's boot, soaked his clothing. His teeth chattered and he splashed forward, tripping on the floor that sloped deeper and deeper into the water. The men said something sharp and quiet to one another, and they swirled him in unison suddenly, pushing him down. He gasped as the cold engulfed him, splashing his face, sending shards of sharpness up his body. He slid into a sitting position on the stony floor, the water lapping up to his neck. The cuts in his body screamed at him suddenly, as the water found them, and the scream in his throat choked on itself and he only shut his eyes tight and pressed his lips together. There was something hard and long behind him, and suddenly his arms were being unfastened and pulled behind it. His voice found its way out again, in a thin gasp, as his left shoulder was pulled behind what was some kind of pillar in the cave, hard and gnarly, a natural formation like rock. He flinched as he tried to lean to his left to ease some of his pain. His hands tightened around the rocky pole. The water waved around him, someone moving past. The other man sloshed past him, rubbed a hand over Hiccup's hair, pushing his chin into the water.

He leaned back onto the pole, couldn't feel himself in the burning numbness that ebbed over him in spasms. The men moved up, he could feel the water still splashing from their motion, and then the sound of metal, of a chain being pulled. He looked up, couldn't see far in the darkness, but that sound, it was so sharp now and horrible above him, scraping thin and gritted over the top of the cavern. It wasn't too far up, but that metal, it was dragging along the ceiling, pulled by- he could hear the men grunt and gasp at the effort, and behind him now, in the even darker blackness, the scrape of a gate opening, the water sliding off whatever was being raised.

He didn't have a good feeling about this. He forced himself to turn around to the right, let the water lap up to his shoulder, trying to ignore the fact that his left side was soaked in salty water and now screaming at him. He winced and opened his eyes, squinting and then he saw it-

Cold, living eyes shining dimly in the blackness, barely visible, but hints there he could pick out. He inhaled, snapped back and faced ahead, heard the grumble ahead of him of laughter or was it fright? In those men pulling at the chains, their footsteps chasing up the passage now, the clatter of their weapons at their sides as the sound of their flight vanished up in the darkness.

Hiccup inhaled, felt the presence of this new enemy, felt the fear mingle anew with his pain, and his breath increased, the wild panic in his heart making him dizzy in his exhaustion. He gasped, propped his left leg up, the metal scraping on the ground under him, the water sloshing and the stone cold and lifeless. He didn't want to turn around, but he felt them, many of them, those creatures coming close and soon upon him.

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She was shaking, and she knew why.

Just let it be over, and let this madness pass. Heather couldn't stand herself like this. He was guilty, guilty for so much, and yet why was she plagued with what seemed so much like guilt now?

The boy had wanted to die.

She reined in her horse, and the animal whinnied, somehow feeling the confusion of her rider. Heather shook her head. Why had he not chosen the life she'd offered him . . . Was he somehow so cunning as to make his own loss a victory? Was fate so evil that she refused to give her a moment's rest, that she wouldn't give her father a moment's peace from the injustice that had driven him to the edge of insanity?

She could see afar now, the horse and rider that was carrying the boy to his death. He was weak, and shouldn't that be enough? Fire welled up in her heart. No, the boy was strong, in the things he said and chose - maybe even stronger than, than . . . But she would not admit that. She would die for her father, if it came to that. She kicked her horse's sides, yelled and rode forward through the town and the black shadows that mingled in and out of sight. The people, an uneasy mix of cheers from them, for capturing the prize dragon and the boy, yet underneath, the hum of confusion which she knew sprung from the dragon training that was already afoot, albeit sloppily, as she had been told upon entering the town.

The house of Rune Haddock stood before her, in a space between the houses and thatched cottages, the roof high and arching into a carved dragon, a thin tapered head and a long, twisting, cracked wooden neck, the first great dragon he'd killed after his self-imposed exile, that killer dragon from the sea, a Blood Dagger, before its maniacal jaws could consume him. Those creatures were vicious, but fate was against the beast from the sea, for it had met her father as he was leaving Berk, and all the anger and sadness on his heart doomed all who came in his way.

"Dad!" she called, dismounting her horse and snapping her feet onto the packed earth outside the house. Did he know Hiccup was still alive? Those hours between the escape and now, it could have done horrors to his mind. If even she was vexed by fate, how much more him whom fate had long been so cruel?

Her father opened the door before she got there. "Heather." He spoke her name with a strange uncertainty and she stopped, looked at him. Her cape waved in her sudden halt, the ground crunched as her feet pressed down into the gravel. That tone in his voice, it was nuanced with anger, frustration, and in the edge of her name, a breathless exhaustion.

So he knew. "Stoick's boy-" she started.

"Is alive." That voice was severe.

"It's not like I planned that." Her voice became unnecessarily sharp.

"That's not the point." The door began to close and Rune backed away into it. She could feel it, that seething anger, and it made her angry suddenly. "Dad-" she shouted, and jumped up and held the door open. He turned back to her, gazed down and solemnly. She didn't say anything, pursed her lips but kept her eyes on him, bidding him to

once, listen and believe- that things weren't as bad as they seemed. "It's not over," she whispered, her voice edged in anger. He had to believe that.

There was a chilled silence from him. He blinked once and turned his head away, stepped down within the house, towards the empty hearth in the center. It was dark, the fire only faint glowing embers. A cold had seeped in, and yet her father was not wearing his cloak, nor the thick boots he so often wore on the coldest nights. She stepped close to him, his back still turned on her, and she smelled the perspiration that was moistening his hair, small beads hanging on the edge of his cheek. He was always this way when he was in the midst of an attack, when his mind went out on him and that old horror filled his mind. Her fists clenched. Was it ever enough? Was anything she did, she tried so desperately to do, was it ever enough to heal him? "Dad-" She clapped a hand to his forearm gently.

"Get away from me!" he shouted, slapping her arm away, and she gasped, stepped back and then put her foot forward, pressing her hand into a fist. "So what if he's alive," she almost shouted, "so what if he's here-"

"So what?" He faced her suddenly, and she saw in his face that shadow of abhorrence that had made him a name among the lands of the conquered, that had sent fear into the mainlanders who dared cross his path. "So what?" his voice quieted, and a hushed gravity entered it.

"I killed for you, Dad."

"You tried."

A gasp of pain hit her heart, and she almost broke the stare. "Doesn't that count?"

His black eyes were full of life suddenly, but the life of his madness and hate, the hardness that morphed seamlessly into a soft vulnerability, unfulfilled longings and despair, sadness . . . heartbreak that seemed suddenly beyond her power to heal. His voice was barely audible. "No."

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Seeing Hiccup down here put a damper on what little hope the kids had in their jail cell under the mountain. Tuffnut grew quiet and Snotlout, goodness Snotlout . . . Ruffnut wrinkled her nose. He was starting to get snappy, frustrated. And when Snotlout got frustrated, things didn't come out with much sense - or tact.

"You'd think Hiccup had a brighter plan than- this." Snotlout flung his arms out, his eyes blinking.

"Yeah, didn't hear your brilliant plan yet-" rasped Tuffnut, crossing his arms, and pulling his legs up in his seated position on the floor.

"Hiccup led us here in the first place." Snotlout let his hands illustrate again. "So it's his fault, isn't it?"

"Shove a sock in it," Ruffnut snapped, slapping her fist into her

palm. She's heard about just enough. They were all in this cruddy boat together, no need to go making holes in the bottom. This wasn't a time for the blame game. Especially with Snotlout, who seemed to have lost the directional compass on his pointing finger. She whispered pointedly to Snotlout. "Isn't it bad enough that Hiccup is captured now, rotting away like us somewhere in this rat hole?"

Snotlout scoffed, turned away and stared at the blank wall to his left.

"The creeps stabbed him if you _haven't_ forgotten." She tilted an eyebrow at him, and he folded his arms slowly, and rolled over in his dark corner. A clammy silence settled on her, and she flicked it off, moved over besides Tuffnut's quiet shape backed against the bars facing the tunnel, on the opposite corner of Snotlout. She sighed and flung her back against them, nudged her shoulder wordlessly against her twin and flung a glance over his shoulder. The bars stung cold, but she didn't care. She curled around and pressed her cheek harder against them, the dimness outside the cell suddenly losing all the charm of its grime. Except for the low, constant growl of discontent dragons, the gentle, out of place humming of some folk tune by the other prisoner opposite them, and the click of creatures in the crevices . . . other than that, the dark tunnel was quiet. Hiccup had been led down there just a little while ago, and he didn't get a chance to say where. She'd been unnerved, to see him. Hiccup wasn't a kid who scared easily, but this time, he honestly looked horrified. She'd never seem him like that.

Tuffnut shifted his face towards hers, twisting his neck around while still shoving his back against the bars. He was serious again. "Quit worrying. Wherever he is, at least he won't be bored to death like yours truly in this pit."

She tried to chuckle at his lame attempt at a joke, but she couldn't laugh, not now. She sighed, said what they both knew. "This isn't funny anymore."

He nudged his head down, bit his lip. The faint glow in the hall suddenly shifted. There was some loud creak out of sight, gruff words, and she could see men now, not many, but not alone. They were entering a cell just ahead and across, and they had a prisoner. A slim girl carried in the arms of one man, a girl strangely dazed and unaware, her arms and legs dangling limp and her golden braid dirtied and twisted and way too familiar. They all knew the moment they laid eyes on her. "_Astrid!_"

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Hiccup willed his heart to calm, locked his jaw to focus. The sound of his captors was gone now, far away up in the tunnel, and the darkness here was lit ever so gently with the faint green-yellow glow of those eyes behind him. Hiccup swallowed, felt the scared parchiness of his throat. The water lapped ahead of him, the vibrations coming from behind, the crisp sound muddling with more waves, and now a gentle hum, growing thicker and focused, with lilts of nuance from one creature to the other. They were threatening, deep, touched with curiosity. Hiccup knew those sounds, heard them from dragons for years, from Toothless even, and he knew that smell which was slowly filling the space now. So it was by the hands of dragons that they

sent him here to die. There was a strange comfort in that, because Hiccup, despite everything, thought that maybe he could get out of this one. He was the Dragon Whisperer, wasn't he?

Something bright drifted into the left side of his vision and he inhaled quickly, found a pair of glowing eyes gazing at him. A claw scratched his arm suddenly, scraped on the chains around his hands. Stay calm, don't be afraid. Two fist-sized eyes suddenly blinked at him, a handbreadth from his face. The dragon's mouth opened, the glow from his mouth almost blinding Hiccup a moment. He shut his eyes, turned his head. Something jabbed at his boot, took hold of the metal of his left leg. Fear jumped up his nerves, and he breathed, calmly, forcefully, steadily, willing his heart to calm. They can feel fear, he told himself pointedly. He inhaled again, bent his head down, just breathed.

The dragons growled, hummed, nudged him, some forcefully, some gently. He could feel curiosity in their movements, and he kept still, knew that acting like this would be different for them. They must have been used to writhing prey. He swallowed the lump in his throat, peeked out at them, those thin glowing eyes blinking and their bodies, ephemeral shapes in the darkness and the water.

He had to use his one weapon, compassion.

He cleared his throat, looked up, at those eyes revolving around him, the strips of light gleaming out from under closed mouths. "It's all right," he said out loud, forcing flat the waver in his voice. A dragon lashed into him suddenly, baring his teeth, scraping his forehead. Hiccup held back a gasp as the thin cut bled suddenly. He closed his eyes, focused. "Don't be afraid," he said, stronger this time, to himself. He took a deep breath, looked steadily into one of the glowing green eyes. The dragon stared back at him, his head and eyes gently turning. A dragon growled behind him, and Hiccup could feel claws by his legs and side. "It's going to be okay," he hummed, knowing it wasn't so much what he said now, but how he said it. "Shhhhh."

Hiccup let his body relax, let the dragons wash past him, let them prod his arms and feet. He inhaled, rose his frame up the pillar, saw another pair of eyes and the dragon that went with it. He squinted past the glare in his mouth and found the shape, a rounded, tapering head, long neck, the flared fins flowing down from the throat, the glistening metal around his neck. A chain.

"They've captured you, too . . ." he said, softly, squinting to see the broken condition of those chains, nicked on the edges and scummy. The dragon's eyes perked, and he looked closer at Hiccup. Sympathy, that's all these creatures needed. "How long has it been?" Hiccup said. So long as he could give them that understanding and comfort these dragons probably never received in however long they had been here . . . The dragon angled his head, a crease furrowing that now green eye. The dragon paused, looked at his companions. He moved towards Hiccup suddenly, his eyes staring deeply, his gleaming mouth and silhouetted teeth scraping Hiccup's shoulder.

Hiccup squinted up, looked back intently at the dragon through the light. The dragon blinked, sloshed the water to look yet closer. Hiccup leaned back, the glowing eyes so close now. The dragon pushed his snout into the boy's cheek, breathing a wet breath into it.

Hiccup inhaled quickly, as the dragon moved the boy's face to the side, snorting. But the creature only growled quietly, turned his eyes to the others. They hummed gutturally, looked back at Hiccup, descended under the surface of the water. Hiccup followed the glow of their mouths lower around him, surrounding him, their thin black backs slicing up out of the water. Two of them lay their heads down beside him, their bodies warm and pushed up against him, a tail floating somewhere behind him, wafting intermittently into his arm. Bubbles popped to the surface as they breathed. Hiccup leaned his head back, sloped his back and just let the water lap up his chin and ears. He eyed the dragons around him, let his breathing steady. The pain of his wounds came humming back, and he gritted his teeth. It wasn't safe, yet, but for now . . . at least he was alive.

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The world is a dark place, a very, very dark place.

She watched the passing villagers, the warriors with their metal and their swords, the children excited in the newness of dragons in their midst, the women herding them back for bed and the men, harried looks on their faces, as they roamed from cage to cage and stared in at the dragons their chief and chieftess expected them to train.

Where was her Council anyway?

She looked around, from her seat outside the house of her father. Inside, she could still hear him, spitting angry curses and wishing death and pain on the child and his father, the cursed offspring locked away in the dragon's den. She had tried to speak sense to him, had tried desperately to calm him, but the knowledge that Hiccup was still alive, it cut him, and there was no calming him, not for a while. After the loss they'd suffered at Berk, and now, with an uneasy sense of dragon training in the air, and the prize dragon, which she didn't want to kill, against his wishes, again . . . She was sure it was all conspiring against him and his delicate health. She lay her head in her palms, breathed in, out, and clasped her teeth together. She had the strangest notion that the boy would haunt them still, even after his death, if it were so. Fate was close here, much too close to let her guard down.

Someone approached her suddenly, his shadow sudden and sharp over her, the orange torchlight suddenly gone from her knees. She looked up, saw Ragnar, her Councilmember, over her.

"Did he do that to you?" he said suddenly, pointing to her.

She snapped a hand over her left arm, knew it was the colored bruise he had seen. She pulled it into the darkness of her waist. "What's it to you?"

"It's not a secret." He looked around briefly, those thin eyes glancing at the town, covered in darkness and torchlights as it was, rocky ground flickering in the light. He leaned down towards her, laid a gentle hand on her shoulder. "We know how he is . . . at times."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "No, you don't."

He broke the stare, put his hands into his belt and blew out into the

night air. "Dragon training is not going very well."

"It won't happen overnight."

He glanced down to her. "Somehow I think that's what we need."

She leered at him, pursed her lips and sighed. "You've learned, I've learned. The Hooligans told us everything. What's left to need?"

Ragnar stepped away, down the steps that ran up to her bench and the chief's house. His boots clapped against the stone, and as he moved, the light came glowing back over her knees. "If only that boy had agreed to train for us."

"Well he didn't." Her voice was sharp, irritated.

"What are you going to do with him?" he asked suddenly, turning to her.

She looked up at him. "What do you mean, do with him? His body?" She could hardly read his face in the darkness.

"Haven't you heard?" His voice was mildly surprised, mild only because he couldn't be honestly surprised, knowing something his leader did not know. It wouldn't be respectful. But she didn't feel like a leader right now. She was simply a desperate soul, hoping against hope that not another glitch had happened in a plan already full of scars and disorder. "What happened?" she said, in a calmness that was not representative of her heart.

She suddenly saw Hervi coming up the stone walkway. Ragnar put a hand out to the slave. "He told me. And I guess he's here to tell you now."

Hervi spoke, gasped out with a relief that went against everything she knew was right. "Hiccup's alive. He's still alive."

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The voice of that man was barely enough to keep Hiccup awake. He had slept, at long last, in the horrible cold of the cavern deep in the mountain, in the waters of the sea. The pain had become a monotony, and the sharpness of the water had become a numbing blanket on him, the hanging thoughts of death had become a distant memory, as dreams, pleasant dreams breathed into his mind. He rolled his head over the headrest of the pole behind him, still lost in a world of his creation. Astrid was there, and Toothless, the kids. He seemed older, somehow, and yet he was still the same. He could see himself, a young man, and he was holding something, giving it to Astrid. The thing was happy, crying, flapping out tiny hands and feet, and in an instant he knew it was a child. A wind blew into his dream suddenly, made the scene dark and horrible, and Toothless nudged at him, kept nudging and he didn't move, felt locked in place, his father and Astrid gone, the kids' laughter somewhere far away, and the touch of grass and pine leaves rubbing at his arms. Toothless nudged again, pressing, urgent and definite and Hiccup mumbled to him. The dragon responded, "The boy is alive."

And then Hiccup awoke, lashed open his eyes to a scene of bright

light, bright to him who had been in a darkness for hours. He gasped, found that it wasn't Toothless who was speaking to him, but people at the entrance of the cavern, each holding flaming torches and keeping their distance from the water. He breathed in again, through his mouth, gasping breaths. The air was crowded with stench, and thin. He closed his eyes from the light of the fires, and felt a dragon in the water nudging him, in a strange repetitive motion, the snout rubbing against his side, seemingly smelling something. Hiccup regretted the moment he put his attention to that, for he felt suddenly, sharply, painfully what the dragon was curious about. His wounds hadn't had a chance to heal, and now, sitting open and fresh in ocean water, they still bled and tortured him.

He clenched his teeth and let out a pained breath. The dragon backed away gently, then pressed in again, harder this time and Hiccup inhaled thinly. He focused ahead again at the people, to get his mind somewhere else, and saw in the mixed silhouettes figures bending down and pulling. The dragon yelped suddenly, shocking him, and he heard the sharp, thick sound of chains, pulling, scraping, hissing almost in the cave. The dragons growled again, clawing the ground, and the great mass of their forms came up, splashing, fighting, and water splashed over Hiccup. He gasped, barely above the frigid water himself, breathing liquid and air in his panic, his face shocked into alertness as the cold pressed his hair into his scalp. He shivered, uncontrollably, and a sense of white washed over him, numbness and fear. The dragons around him hissed, roared and their cries reverberated in the space, echoing roundly in the cavern, throbbing in the air like the waves splashing underneath against his body. The men ahead shouted, as if they were fighting, and a dragon on his left breathed out suddenly, a gasp of glowing yellow fire, tinted with green. Heat pulsed into the water, made Hiccup jerk in unconscious reaction.

"Get back, dragons!" one of the men ahead shouted and Hiccup leaned back, saw the creatures in a tangle of thin bodies, writhing back into the dark cavern of the cave. They hissed, yelled out in a horrible, horrifying curl of screams - of anger and pain. Hiccup felt his heart gasp. "No," he shouted, and he watched as the creatures, the whole mess of them, get sucked away into the dark, the scrape of those chains ever present above him. Hiccup leaned to the right, tried desperately to push one ear into the pole, shield it from the great sound, that horrible noise, of dragons in distress and the cold, heartless rasp of the chain across the stone. A flap of wet hair slipped down and covered half of his face, and then the second sound of chains, and a great splash behind him, as the metal gate came crashing down into the water again. A dragon yelped, and he knew that gate had landed on some part of the animal. Hiccup gasped, turned back to face the men, instinct telling him to tell them to raise the gate and release the poor thing, and sense telling him they wouldn't care. The figures strode down into the water suddenly, and waves of water licked up at him again. He squinted, held his breath as the glob of water burst over his face and shoulder. The figures were upon him now, and in an instant a shooting pain screamed up his arm. He yelled, realized they were releasing his tied hands and kicking him forward into the water, past the pole. He dove head-first into the water and someone grabbed his arm, pulled up and forward.

"The chief's daughter wants a few words with you," one of the men said, his voice sharp, almost raspy, and yet, close to his ear and

cunning. Hiccup gasped in a breath, went numb as they pulled him forward again.

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He barely had time to see the kids, when he passed them again in the tunnel. They were shouting something about Astrid, and he'd realized they'd imprisoned her too. She didn't respond to his calls, she was unconscious, but alive. They told him that much.

They dragged him into a forge, a familiar place, and yet here, this one seemed run down somehow, and abandoned. He looked up at the big men dragging him. They had no expression, no change of mood or feeling. "Hey," he started, looking up at the man on his right. He looked down, gazed at him a second, then shook his head. Hiccup couldn't make out whether it was sympathy or disgust.

In the distance, he could hear the sound of hammers clanging, fires burning, and metal being forged and beaten. He looked to the left, saw another structure pluming with smoke from its top, alive with light and activity. Black shadows moved across and into it, their thick armor silhouetted against the orange. The constant sound of dragons everywhere provided a backdrop to the madness, the creak of cages opening and slamming shut, the shouts of men and the squeal of dragons and the tug of chains. He could barely see much in the night blackness, only hints and suggestions of what he knew was happening in the dark, busy town. In front of the structure, a large open space, scattered with warriors and people in a rush going who knows where, probably to prepare for war. If his father was really coming, like Heather said . . . He prayed desperately that he wouldn't be too late, that he could win this one against these people. As much as Hiccup hated bloodshed, he couldn't see how it wouldn't come to that in the coming days.

They sat him down on a long, thin bench, ragged and sharp with uneven panels of wood, gnarls of friction on it. There was a fire in the small smithy, to Hiccup's immediate left, it was hot and smoldering, such a beautiful fire. So evil it suddenly seemed. It was quiet here, even the tools of blacksmithing were old and rusty, and the panels of wood forming the frame of this structure were bending and unkept. There were sticks of metal and other tools leaning against crusty old barrels and troughs that had seen their day. The place reeked of mold, of stale water. Hiccup swallowed, afraid of what was going to happen. One of the men latched Hiccup's left wrist to the flat top of the bench to his left, and another man clapped Hiccup's right wrist to the right of Hiccup, on rusting gray metal clasps obviously built for that purpose. Hiccup didn't fight it, knew it wouldn't do him much good, not with those swords and knives fastened to the villains' belts, not to mention their huge arms and strong hands. But he didn't like the feeling of being strapped down.

"Wait here for her," said one of the men, blowing his ugly breath into Hiccup's face. He leaned back, disgusted. And how long was that going to be? "Where's Toothless and Astrid?" he asked quickly, before the man stepped off.

"Would I tell you?" The man's face got sliced by the shadow of the fire.

Hiccup smirked. "Probably not."

"Then there you have it."

"Was worth a try," Hiccup said dryly.

There was a clap of footsteps behind the warrior suddenly. He stiffened in front of Hiccup, leaned up and turned back, carefully, as if he were almost afraid, like he wasn't supposed to be there. Hiccup knew who was on the other side, and the man stepped away, said a quick quiet word to the new person, and vanished outside into the darkness outside the smithy shop. Hiccup bit his lip, looked up and watched Heather approach him. There was a hardness in her arms, as they swung stiffly by her sides, a small dagger in her left hand, the end of her cape in her right, and the slash of the firelight on her features, halving her face in darkness and light, her hair black and red in the glow, her tight, black clothing melding into the shadows of the night.

Hiccup stiffened, put his head down and gazed up at her, conviction welling up in his soul. If this was how it was going to end, he wasn't going to flinch. For Toothless, for Astrid, for his father - he wouldn't shame them by giving these people anything to brag about.

She approached, and the fear deep down in his heart played to the surface. He looked down at her knife suddenly, inhaled, quietly, trying not to let it be heard.

"You're nervous," she said, coldly, and he looked up, saw that strange something in her eyes again, that softness . . .

"Why shouldn't I be?" he said, clearing his throat.

She shrugged, lifelessly. She stopped in front of him, so close, he could see the pale threadworn patches on her clothing, the wrinkled leather belt around her thin waist, and the fraying cape, and the edge where sweat and handling had made the fur bare and stained with brown. She shifted her weight and he looked up again, at her eyes. She avoided looking at him, looked down at his hands, inhaled slowly. She cleared her throat and looked at him. "How did you do it?" she said, her lone voice laced with a chilling honesty. The sincerity was frightening. "Do what?" he breathed.

"Why don't you die?" She turned her head and looked at him. Hiccup felt his pulse quicken and he swallowed.

There was a silence. She moved her left leg up, placed her foot on the bench, next to his hand, leaned her body down and bent towards him, her black hair falling down the side of her face, touching his left shoulder. She looked at him, that intent burning now, her brow crossing, shivering in what almost looked like a desperate, deep-seated need. Hiccup squinted, looked into those eyes, the reflection of the fire in them. She was breathing hard. "Answer me," she whispered.

Hiccup opened his mouth, his lips dry.

"You trained those dragons." She looked down, at his shoulder. "Didn't you?" She rose her eyes at him again.

He nodded, stiffly.

"I'd give . . . anything," her voice was small, barely above a whisper, "anything to have you dead." The last word was faint, almost nonexistent. There was a shiver in her voice, sent a chill up his body and he moved his wrists deftly, the shackles rubbing against his skin. Her eyes followed the movement, and her right hand dropped to his hand, her fingers tracing over his slowly. He could feel her breathing increase, her shoulders heaving up and down, her teeth clenching. "But you're not going to die, are you?" Her eyes locked to his and she slapped her hand above his wrist suddenly. "You're not going to be a hero." Her voice shook, brittle and angry. The grasp on his wrist tightened and he kept the stare into her eyes, locked his jaw.

She squinted, moved closer, brought the dagger in her left hand around his neck, lay the blade gently on the left side of the base of his throat, not threatening, even, just . . . there. She pulled his face close to hers and she whispered, hissing in the lowness of her voice, the guttural shiver in it, her lips on his hair almost, the moisture of her breath on his forehead. "I told you that you would be your father's death. If not in death, then in life."

Hiccup's eyes flickered.

"I didn't think a Hooligan can be so noble." The word spat out, and he flinched. She moved her head, her lips close to his eyes. "But nobility can work two ways." She let the words linger, and he could sense her lips quiver, open and close, shaking. He inhaled. She continued, her voice stronger, yet still quiet, still, barely audible. "A slave cannot be chief, a slave cannot marry, a slave cannot be his own man, except by call of his master." She leaned down, her eyes leaning down to leer into his. "A slave does the will of his master." He narrowed his eyes at her. "And you shall live to do my will," she lisped.

"Who says I have to follow the rules?" he snapped quickly, his own clear voice shocking him in the stillness.

"Because I'll make you." She pressed his head closer to hers, the blade against his neck pressing in. A lump jammed up his throat suddenly, but it wasn't fear. Did he have to say it again? Didn't she know? "That doesn't work, you know that."

Her stare didn't shift, her rhythm unmoved. "I'm sure by now you know the tradition. That we kill the prize dragon."

His heart fluttered.

"I have the power to stop that. I can save your dragon." Her voice grew cool, and he could feel that she was growing confident, maybe not a natural confidence, but she had something on her side, and she knew it. "Or I can let tradition take its course." She pulled the blade away, lay her left wrist on his shoulder and swept her body around, behind him, her boot gliding past his hand. "The choice is yours," she whispered in his ear. He turned his head, looked at her. She stepped back, took her hands off him. "You'll want to know what I mean, of course," she said and that confidence sickened him. He wanted to say something back, something biting and sharp, but he knew who she was going to threaten next, and it left his soul vacant of

air.

"Toothless, that's the name you have for him," she continued, stepping to his left side. "One dragon's life spared, in exchange for doing what defines you, to your tribe - and to your father." She bent down, slowly pressed the tip of the dagger into the bench by his left hand, letting the blade dig into the wood. She paused, and he knew she was waiting for his answer. He stopped looking at her, drifted his eyes down to her hand and the glint of that blade in the wood next to him. He blinked, his mind drawing a blank. It couldn't have come to this. He couldn't train the enemy's forces, in the eve of battle. And yet, if she was right, that they wouldn't kill Toothless - but could she be trusted? This was not a people of their word, this was a people of deception . . .

But does one play with the life of your best friend?

He found himself staring at the ground now, beads of moisture on his forehead, making him feel sticky, dirty - ugly. Maybe he could just buy time, maybe he could use it to get Toothless out, and the kids and Astrid. If his father was coming soon, he could hold them off as the dragon trainer. They might have known their secrets, but maybe he could reverse the effect, clog the efficiency, keep the dragons wild, if he could, until his father came. And maybe-

The dagger's edge was under his chin suddenly, raising his head up. He winced, looked up into Heather's eyes.

"You accept, of course. Or would you see Toothless die?"

He couldn't say anything, not to a face like that, not to evil like that. He shoved his head to the side. She slapped a hand to his cheek, pushed him to face her again. "Is it yes or is it no?"

His eyes shifted, jagged, uneven, staring into her black ones. She had the advantage, and she knew that. His love for Toothless, was that the one untouchable thing in his life? Astrid said he was rash coming out here to save his dragon. Would he do that over again? Risk everything for the slimmest chance Toothless might live?

He swallowed and narrowed his eyes at her, kept his voice forceful and strong. "Fine. Don't you touch that Night Fury."

She let out a soft smile, and a playfulness, almost a relief drifted through her eyes briefly. She let go of his face, stood back from him and called out to someone, outside the smithy. He couldn't hear her anymore, the world outside his head a blur. It wouldn't be for long. He wouldn't train their dragons, he was going to sabotage the effort. The pounding drum of his own heartbeat filled his head, a panic and a horror, and a yelling childlike fear. A hand was on his shoulder suddenly, hers. He looked up. She waved a hand to one of the men and he nodded, sprinted out of the blacksmith shop, for the more active one farther off. She cleared her throat. "He shall be my slave," she said, and there was that crack in her voice suddenly, "for the wrongs he's done to my father." She stepped away from him, turned back and whispered, "Mark him as such."

He'd feared that much. He'd seen it before, not on Berk, but in those other lands, on Hervi and the small child. He wasn't thinking about consequences now, that would all come later, he knew. He just wanted

to ready his mind for what he knew was coming. A warrior stepped behind him suddenly, Hiccup could feel his thick, heavy presence, like a great shadow of death. His large hands pressed over his shoulder, holding him down. Hiccup winced, those old physical wounds making a mess of the anguish in his heart and the panic in his mind, and the brittle cries tearing through his nerves.

The man returned from the active blacksmith shop, holding a fresh, burning metal rod in his hand. Hiccup could see the glowing end of it, the small curved S-shape. His vision wavered suddenly, and he let it happen, knew delirium was a defense now, one he shouldn't fight. He felt the hair on his left side get pushed, rubbed away and pulled up, held there by a hot, grimy hand. The men mumbled things to one another and Hiccup tried to move, found the bounds on his hands still firm and cold, the arm around his shoulder heavy, and the hands on his head, pressing down in a tighter vice around him. It would be short, and soon it would pass, but for now, he promised himself he wouldn't scream.

29. Riders of Berk: We Are Family

Guys! In light of the recent Riders of Berk episode, my sister and I have decided to hold off a story update til after the final episode of this season. While we usually like to play it dangerous updating with recent RoB hints here and there in our new chapters, this time the fire is much too close. Riders of Berk: We Are Family has the same main plot as our current webnovel arc, and we think it's important that we see what canon makes of the situation before we interpret it in our own fanfiction.

In the meantime, we'll be catching up on stuff, watching the History Channel's Viking series (because we are so sorely lacking in historical skills LOL), and drawing and stuff. I might post a few of my HTTYD one-shots in the break. Anywho, hope y'all are having a great day!

By the way, if you haven't seen the latest heart-pounding episode, be sure to do so at my Database page on my Tumblr: [inhonoredglory \(\(d.o.t.\)\) tumblr \(\(d.o.t.\)\) com](#)

And thank you, all our readers, who've stayed with us this long. My sister and I really do appreciate your support for our little contribution to the HTTYD fanfiction world. :)

30. Chap 25: Broken Spirit, Unwilling Heart

a/n: Finally! Another update to our webnovel. Apparently Riders of Berk didn't threaten our story all too much. The path they took in capturing Hiccup and making him train dragons went far gentler and lighter than what we had planned in ours. This chapter was engrossing to write, though a couple things surprised me, and my heart goes out so, so much for Hiccup. Most of the time writing this, actually, I was listening to Taylor Swift's "Safe and Sound" which so painfully captures the sorrow in this chapter.

View the illustration at the official webpage. Put a period where the dashes are: [howtotrainyourdragon2 - thecomicseries - com](#)
>or at my deviantArt gallery: [inhonoredglory - deviantart - gallery -](#)

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* * *

><p>How to Train Your Dragon II
>The Dragon Whisperer

Act III**
>**A Friendship Tested**

Chapter 25**
>****The Broken Spirit of an Unwilling Heart****

It had hardly been half an hour, and the sharp pain was still ringing on the side of his head, the hair now sitting over the fresh burn, irritating it. No, he hadn't screamed when the hot iron met his skin, but tears had now soaked up his eyes, and he blinked them back, his wrists still latched to the top of the bench, the break of day opening up now in the east, behind the small blacksmith shop, a shadow over the front of the smithy, dark and ragged and hopeless. The injuries in his body still pained him, but he'd grown used to them now, and the severity of his situation made all physical pain a non-issue. He inhaled, cleared his eyes and looked out, at the dark shape of Heather ahead of him, outside the shop, in the space just outside this smithy and the active one just farther ahead. She was speaking, giving commands to her people, telling them to intercept the enemy and hold them off from landing. It wasn't a long speech, but to the point and direct. "The dragons aren't trained yet," she said, and he inhaled, shifted his wrists in the metal clasps. That was his job, wasn't it?

But what would his father think of this now? If running away was a bad thing, running off in the middle of a war yet worse, and charging into the enemy to save your pet even more horrible- But Toothless wasn't a mere pet. Hiccup bit his lip. Still, this had to have been the saddest mess he got himself into. Even if his father didn't know who he was and what he agreed to do, he did, and that was hard enough.

He braced himself as Heather approached. Whatever would happen, it wasn't going to be as she planned, he could guarantee that much.

"I, uh," she started, and leaned down to him. "I think you've had a break enough. You'll start training dragons now."

He didn't look up at her, didn't answer, disgusted by the sound of her voice and filled with a sudden horrible rage. His mind grew dark, and in the confinement of choice, he forced himself to focus on the basics, the simple truths he could hold onto. For Toothless. For Toothless, he repeated.

A hand was on his shoulder, the injured one, and he flinched. She let go, said something to some men around her, and the big hands came in and grabbed his arms, releasing the latch on his hands, snapping a metal ring around his neck, with a chain attached to it. A simple, honest, frightening sense of shame came over him, his wrists wrapped behind his back, the leash tugging him forward, a sword somewhere behind him, as a general threat against possible escape. He didn't dare look up, didn't want to see anything or anyone he knew. Not until this was over. He closed his eyes. What had he done?

They led him to the Skirra VÃ©llite Hall, and in the brightening day, he could sense the rush of activity in the town. He could hear the warriors making weapons, a group doing rituals before the war, laughing, a horrible laughing among a camaraderie of men. Children were running in the streets, and he coughed in the dust from their play. Women were putting up clothing to dry, and when he looked at them, he saw that they were looking at him, some of them. Curious eyes turned down to his bum leg and knowing looks passed over their faces. The clap of his metal leg felt loud suddenly, as he turned away and looked down, as they brought him under the tunnel to the great ring in the Hall, as they yanked him forward, taking pleasure in his yelps of shock, as they latched the end of his leash to a thick hook in the stone wall and as some heavy warrior stood watch over him, sword unsheathed and ready.

"Bring out a dragon!" Heather's voice rang clear and authoritative in the Hall. He looked down, away from the people lining the Hall above, and the small gathering in the Hall now. "We won't be killing the Night Fury, men, not today."

Voices of confusion filled the air. "The prize dragon-?"

"I thought surely it would bring us luck in the war."

Luck. Just the thought of that man's words filled him with a horror and a spitting revulsion. Hiccup looked up, saw familiar faces surrounding Heather, speaking those words of dissent. It was her Council. A chill froze him. Those were the very men he and his friends had tried to teach so lovingly the art of dragon training back at Berk, at home. In a time so long ago, when things were so awfully different than they were now. He looked away, stared down at his feet, couldn't stand them to see him, even though he painfully knew they would soon enough.

"He's made a deal," Heather said, a mix of authority and sincerity in her voice. "He will work for us, help us train dragons, and we'll spare the prize dragon."

"But tradition-"

"I keep the promises I make, Brandr. You listen to me." She was curt and sharp.

"But we're supposed to kill him, and the dragon - both of them."

Hiccup flinched, could sense the man pointing to him.

The sound of a cape whipped around and Heather snapped again. "Maybe this is better, Brandr. Shut up and don't question me. We don't have time. Stoick is coming here, and we need weapons."

"But we have been training them."

"Oh? Let me see what you got."

"Well, it's not exactly perfect yet-"

"Can you ride it?"

"Um, no."

"We need them now, not when you can figure it out."

Heather's footfalls came striding to him now, and he looked up through his bangs, instinctively, saw her boots stop in front of him. She pushed his chin up, looked at him. "You're going to have a long day, Hiccup," she said, pausing at his name, and his heart beat faster suddenly, to hear her talking to him, the sound of his name on her lips. She unhooked the metal clasp from around his neck, let the chain clatter to the stone floor. She unwound the rope around his wrists and patted his hand. Her eyes drifted up to his, and he stared back. Her eyes flickered and she turned away, whispering, "Don't try any fancy escapes." For a moment she sounded almost motherly, and a revulsion shot through his throat, making it hard to breathe for a minute. The man with the sword pushed him forward into the ring. The Council members watched him, some hard and angry, and one with no expression to his presence. One of them, the man in the Hall who had so glibly spoken of his slave trade - he looked down at Hiccup now with a grin and a laugh. "Most appropriate," he laughed, largely, and spat at Hiccup's feet. Hiccup shot his head away from the man, gasping with horror.

A squawk came from within one of the dark tunnels in the walls suddenly. It was a dragon's scream, a Nightmare. The men fell away from him, he could feel, and the dragon's sound came forward in the darkness. Hiccup felt a tension, and his mind shot back for a moment to that time he faced his first Nightmare, in a Kill Ring not so different from this one. But now he had no dagger, no shield. Did these people have that much faith in his skill? The dragon came into the light, aflame already and bound in the jaws by a metal ring. He hissed and Hiccup stepped back, respecting the anger.

The dragon lay his head low, growled at Hiccup, the flame on his body crackling in the ring. Hiccup took a deep breath, felt alive suddenly, in the presence of this energy and danger, but a danger he was familiar with, a danger he thrived on, because he had so long tamed it and channeled that hate into love.

He put a hand out, instinctively, soothing words humming from his lips. The dragon eyed him, his eyes wide, yet still sparking with anger. The flame on his body cooled, and Hiccup saw the deep maroon of his scales, scarred with the scratch of metal and rust.

Hiccup stepped forward, and then realized what he was doing.

No.

You're not training this dragon.

You can't.

He pulled his hand back, too sharply, and the Nightmare reared, his eyes lost of that curiosity now. A thick hiss vibrated from his throat, and he crawled swiftly forward, his eyes on the closest enemy. Hiccup kept his feet planted on the stone, watched warily as the dragon approached, slithered up towards him, guttural vibrations filling the air. The dragon's eyes were locked on him, and his wings

stepped forward, the clink of those hooked wings sharp on the stone, the shiver of his jaws against the metal lock on his snout, the hum of decision. Hiccup swallowed, stepped forward. The dragon put a hooked wing out, coming closer, huffed a breath and throatied deeply. Hiccup had seen that look before, years ago, when the dragons on Berk were still wild and the only opinion they had of mankind was that they were not to be trusted. There was murder in that dragon's eyes, locked under the metal of his bonds, thin eyes angry and impatient. Hiccup stood still in the face of him, his mind whirring. How to stay alive, and yet how to keep the dragon wild? Sure, he could just let the dragon finish him right there, but then what of Toothless?

Hiccup put his hands out, inhaled, his chest aching, and firmed his frame. Maybe he could ride this dragon out of the Kill Ring, set the whole town on fire, find Toothless, get the kids out-

But that was too much to hope for, wasn't it? There were warriors all around, and he'd be killed the moment he threw his legs over the creature. At least he couldn't risk something so daring right now. He needed to think things through. This was serious. Maybe before, when he was young, he might have tried it. But he'd risked too many things in the past few days, and his love for Toothless had brought him here, his love for Toothless had made him agree to this treasonous act, his love had made him risk his tribe and his father's well being, as well as his friends.

He swallowed, felt weak suddenly. Why did he have to think so much? The dragon in front of him reared his head, his thin throat vibrating with hate. Hiccup felt his mind waver, and he was swept with a wash of dizziness. He hadn't eaten in hours, and those berries weren't much to keep a sick boy going, not through this kind of torture. And adrenaline only went so far, when you're almost defeated.

But that was it, wasn't it? A brightness entered his head and he let the lightheadedness take him, didn't fight it, encouraged it even, felt his legs give out under him, and he willfully slipped to the stone floor, wincing when his wracked body hit the ground. But at least he could buy time.

Somewhere above him, the dragon let out a lisp of fire, and he could feel the pounding of feet past him, Viking shouting, and chains lashing. The dragon screamed. A pang of regret hit Hiccup's heart. The dragon was being pulled back, and Heather's voice was screaming frustration. Suddenly, someone kicked him and he yelped, shocked, and opened his eyes. The man above him, that horrible one who spat on him, Ragnar was his name, he remembered now, he bent down and pulled Hiccup up by the collar. "You'll have to do better than that, boy." His voice was pleurably hot. Hiccup didn't respond, exhaled forcefully as the man threw him to the ground. The weakness was refreshing somehow, just to stop fighting. Force wasn't going to get him anywhere, not him. Even when he was healthy he wasn't the strongest Viking, how much more now in his condition? He was scared to think about what might happen to him if he didn't get any treatment, even just a bandage, fresh water, warmth. But these people didn't care. He needed his strength to save Toothless, to save Astrid, to save the kids. But he was so tired. So . . . tired. He curled up on the floor, the sting of his injuries coming back as if on cue. But it was better to be this way than to do what they wanted. For however long he could stall them.

The tap of Heather's feet met his ears now, and she rolled him over, looked at him with those dark black, shadowed eyes. For a moment he thought he saw an honest concern in them, but he couldn't be sure now, not with the waver in his vision. "I don't have time for stuff like this," she said at last and she clicked her fingers, waved her hand at someone outside of Hiccup's vision. There was another clatter of chains scraping across the stone floor and Heather took the metal leash from someone, bent down and slipped her hands under his head. The metal was shockingly cold around his neck, as she clapped it shut. Her eyes looked him over, and she pulled the leash taught, raised his neck slightly and he grimaced. "Come on," she said, a sharpness in her voice. She pulled in the chain and Hiccup relented, held the leash with his good hand and followed it up. His metal leg dragged on the stone as he walked, followed her. She handed the leash to Ragnar. "I'm sure the slaves still have something sustaining and warm for him," she said, quietly, looking back at Hiccup. "Make it fast, and keep a watch on him."

"I can tell mine to cook something quick, if that's what you want." It was the softer voice of her older council member, Gamal.

Heather shook her head. "Just get it over with and bring him back. We need these dragons trained." She locked her eyes to Hiccup's and the boy avoided them, looked down at his feet. Any amount of time gained was an advantage.

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Ragnar was the last person Hiccup wished he was being led by. While he could sense something at least human in the faces of those other council members, this one was cold, if not in personality, but in his view of slaves and of him. He had an obvious pleasure to tripping Hiccup on the way to this place they were going. "Let up, won't you?" Hiccup gasped at last, frustrated by how pointless the taunting was.

Ragnar stopped and turned back, pulled the chain again and got Hiccup's face close to his coat of black, rusty armor. "You're not in a good position to be demanding things, are you?" He walked forward again, yanking the leash. Hiccup exhaled, grabbed the chain and held it out, trying to keep the collar from creating a deeper rash on the back of his neck.

The man led him to a shallow ditch on the outskirts of town, a wide valley of sorts, many yards across, filled with people clad in ratted clothing, milling among themselves in a strange detachment from the rest of the village. Hiccup hadn't seen these people in the town before, they looked different. Not just in the way they carried themselves, but in their faces, their speech. He could hear foreign languages, hair and skin color, that though all unified with the grime and sweat of work, were different from those he was used to. And on each of them, often on the side of the head, but sometimes on the upper arm, there was the slavemark, the curled rusty brown wound in the shape of a small dragon. He got self conscious suddenly, as he followed Ragnar down to the lower ground, and he shied away, tried to look small, but most of the slaves were watching this new person in their ranks. He inhaled. It really wasn't going to be so bad, was it? These people weren't Skirra VÃ©llites, they didn't share that same hate for him as the others did . . . didn't they? He looked around,

at the older slaves, fraying white hair on their bare scalps, wrinkled lips pausing in conversation to watch him, and the dark olive features of a group of women, muttering among themselves, oblivious to him and to anyone, taking turns stirring a pot that sat boiling over a fire. And the sound of native songs, humming and growing quiet now, in the far corner out of his sight, replaced by the general curiosity that came over the mutterings now. In the stillness, Hiccup noticed the tempting scent of meat cooking over a fire, and he was struck by a great desire to sit down and . . . taste food once more.

Ragnar yanked at the leash again, harder this time and Hiccup lost his balance, fell and he caught himself with his left arm on the ground. The old stab wound sparked up again and he locked his jaw, withholding any yelp of pain. But it must have been plain on his face, for some of the slaves around him jumped and started coming to him.

"Shove the sympathy," Ragnar lisped, waving the chain in his hand. "I came here to feed him and I want to see him fed." He clicked his fingers and pointed somewhere. Hiccup pressed his weight onto his right hand, tried to get up, his fingers shoving into the soft dirt wet with mud and trampled grass. There was a murmur of voices around him, and someone came close. Hiccup looked up, found a foreign face looking down at him, and at Ragnar, blinking blankly. She was youthful, wore a graying straight tunic that once was blue and unfrayed, a tattered apron around her thin waist. She had a crust of bread in her hand and she kept it there. She knelt down to his level. "You . . . hurt? Hurt." Her Norse was broken, and her accent thick.

Hiccup squinted his eyes, nodded tightly. He held his left arm. Her eyes picked their way down his body, and she frowned when she crossed his abdomen. "Not good," she said. He looked down, saw the almost completely stained tunic of his own, under his fur coat, the green color all dissolved and lost in the drying red turning brown. The cuts were healing, in their own way, sticking to his clothing, and he looked away quickly, didn't want to think about it. She handed him the crust of bread suddenly and stepped away, to the curious group of women by the pot.

Ragnar above him was quiet, and Hiccup felt vibes that maybe he wasn't the most comfortable among so many slaves. He bit off a piece of the bread, quickly, because he felt nervous suddenly, as if he might not have that long in this moment of quiet.

There was an older man approaching him now, a small group behind him, or various foreign faces. A dark-haired younger man looked down at him from the side, slid up to him confidently, slyly, it seemed. He looked different, not like a slave at all, though he wore the slavemark on his head and his hands were hard with callous and his brow wet with beads of sweat. He wiped a hand over his forehead, nudged his head at Hiccup and slid down on the ground, pulling his legs beneath him. "So who owns you, newcomer?"

Hiccup stopped eating, held the bread still in his hand.

The young man took a knife out of his belt, played with the blade in his finger. "Looks like they're in a hurry for you to go somewhere." He looked up at Ragnar. "So, what gives? Whose property are

you?"

Hiccup looked up at Ragnar, felt the heat in his blood warm him, despite the weakness in his muscles. He looked back at the young man with the strange sly glint in his eye. "No one owns me," he said, slowly, quietly, with much more meaning than what someone like Ragnar would take it.

Apparently Ragnar heard that, jerked up at the leash again and Hiccup yelped, choking for a moment. Hiccup grabbed the chain and pulled it down, relieving the pressure. Ragnar leaned down to the young man. "He belongs to the chief and his daughter. Make room for him, Vott. That house is getting busy."

The other man, Vott, made no reaction, sniffed and shrugged his shoulders. He looked down casually at Hiccup, whispered. "See ya 'round." He stood up and melded into the crowd of slaves that had now come around, surrounding Hiccup. An elderly man, with spits of white hair on his pink bald head stooped forward and pushed a bowl into Hiccup's hands. He had a friendly face, and his mute mouth mumbled things as if he could be heard. He smiled and his eyes twitched this way and that. He seemed something like a happy sage, a simple mind maybe, but innocent. Hiccup looked down at the bowl. It was some kind of soup, watery and cloudy, with a few floating chunks of bread and threads of meat in it. He looked back up at the old man. "Thank you."

The old man squinted his eyes, made a motion with his shoulders and hands, saying something Hiccup took as 'it's no big deal.'

Hiccup could feel Ragnar watching him as he spooned the soup into his mouth. There was an irritation in his scowl, and he stepped forward towards the slaves at last, impatience in his step. The crowd backed away slightly. "There's something I should tell you about this particular slave," he said with a loud voice, putting both hands against his hips. Hiccup swallowed his spoonful of soup, listened. He had a bad feeling about this, though, really, how could things get worse anyway?

Hiccup watched the slaves. The old, weary faces perked their eyes and looked at Hiccup, some propping themselves on gnarly sticks, and others, wiping their hands on their tattered clothing, wary of this man they must have known was cruel. Younger, fresher folk still mulled and mumbled, in native languages and with foreign gestures.

Ragnar pointed to Hiccup. "This here, this is the son of Chief Stoick the Vast, of Berk, our great chief's archenemy."

Hiccup stopped eating. So this is what it was? To try and shame him, again? He looked up, saw shocked faces, but a kind of shock that went from a reaction to something new to a realization of something deep and lasting. Someone shook his head, an older man, one of the few with a coat, and he looked at Hiccup with sad, sorry eyes.

"Yes," said Ragnar, his voice pleased to have found something to entertain his bored mind. "We have ended the line of that scum of a tribe. And you, each of you will live with the knowledge of our victory."

Hiccup wasn't ready to believe a word the man was saying. He had confidence in his tribe, that they wouldn't stoop to the notion that just because someone was marked as a slave didn't mean he had to live that way. A fire welled in his heart and he looked up, saw that an honest shiver had gone through the crowd.

"And more than that-" Ragnar was in his element now, and Hiccup narrowed his eyes at him, fed up with this immaturity.

"More than that . . ." His voice was slower now and he stepped up to Hiccup, looked down at him with serious, dark eyes. "He's agreed to be a traitor to his own tribe, to train dragons for his father's adversaries."

Hiccup's heart stopped, as he stared up at Ragnar's cutting eyes, not breaking the stare. It wasn't as if he didn't know what he was doing, as if he hadn't thought those very words before, but in this way, out loud, without a context and without a reason . . .

Ragnar turned back to the crowd. "It's a weak man who does such things, a very, very weak man."

Hiccup couldn't stand it, locked his jaw. "You don't know _anything_."

Ragnar laughed. "I know the facts." He jerked on the collar again, dragged Hiccup forward, before the boy got hurriedly to his feet, leaving his half-finished bowl in the dirt and grass. "It's time to train dragons. You'll make us a _fine_ army, slave, a very fine army."

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In the Kill Ring again, Hiccup sat there, legs laid out over the stone, his back against the cold wall in the corner, his chain attached to a hook on the stone. He closed his eyes, listened to the Council talking, arguing it seemed, in the far corner of the ring. He breathed slowly, weighed his chances of getting away if he trained one more dragon, committed his first acts as a warrior and left a mess of burned, dead Skirra VÃ©llites in his wake, as he forced his way out of this cave in the mountain. The thought shivered his heart, and he bent his head down, prepared himself for the worst. If they were smart, they'd think about that possibility, maybe make provisions to stop him. He prayed they hadn't.

He looked up and saw them arguing, Ragnar and Heather. She was frustrated, terribly angry and hot, irritated at him and whatever he was saying. He caught glimpses of their words, something about him and the slaves. He gathered the conversation was about what Ragnar had done with him among the slaves.

"How can you be so _stupid_?" Heather shouted suddenly, and slapped him. Hiccup blinked, held his back against the stone. She waved Ragnar off, and the Council backed away from her, towards the opening in the side of the wall. She whipped her cape around, turned to Hiccup and crossed the arena with long, sure steps. Hiccup watched her approach, void of emotion.

She leaned down and put a hand out for him. "I have to apologize for Ragnar. He didn't have to do that."

He looked at her from the side of his eyes, didn't take the hand. Maybe she figured out that after something like that, he wasn't going to do anything for them now.

She moved to his left, unhooked the chain from the wall. The low-hanging middle of the leash scraped on the ground as she moved backwards. "Come." Her voice was strangely soft and - he hated to admit it - but kind. It made him sick. Sick of this lying and this treachery. The metal around his neck pulled forward, and he looked up, saw her trying to urge him up, the chain looped in her hand.

"Listen." She kneeled down and leaned towards him. "We made a deal," she whispered. "I would save your dragon and you would help us here."

He couldn't look at her, heard her words and breathed slowly.

She unhooked the metal collar from his neck, turned around, and shouted for the Nightmare to be taken out again, called for someone at the top of the Ring, in the circular level above them, to ready his bow "in case the boy tries anything."

Hiccup swallowed. It was the risk he was willing to take. It had to work. It had to.

The Nightmare was released back into the ring, and when he stood up to face it, Heather backed away, went behind Hiccup. She'd gotten a shield from a group of weapons in the entrance to the ring and now held it out in front of her. She'd released him from the chain, let him walk forward once more to the growling face of that beautiful creature. Hiccup took a deep breath, hummed words of comfort and understanding to the dragon. He got a few feet from the dragon's still-hissing snout, put his hands out, knelt on the stone floor, hushing and whispering. "It's all right," he breathed, and his nervousness made his voice crack. The dragon regarded him closely, cautiously, and Hiccup put his hands down, lay them on the floor, as he settled on the ground, small and fragile in front of the dragon. "I'm not an enemy," he said, a quiet confidence and strength in his voice now. The dragon eyed him, his wings, crawling forward, and he laid his snout low, curling down to the stone floor, watching Hiccup through narrow eyes. It was going to work, Hiccup could feel it, sense the dragon coming around to him. Hiccup inhaled, felt that subtle joy in his heart to see a dragon tamed like this. It was a special thing, every time. It reminded him of that first time he put his hand out, closed his eyes, and _trusted_.

Oh, Toothless, come back to me.

He put his left palm to the dragon in front of him, watched as the creature's eyes got wide and curious, wary and suspicious all at once. He swallowed, whispered something again, a lilt at the end of his nonsense syllables. He put his hands in his lap, regarded the dragon, with his eyes tried to be happy, urge him forward, a cheeriness, a calm in his demeanor and in his gestures. The dragon hummed, backed away gently, the threat gone from his eyes. Hiccup inhaled. That was the first step.

He stepped up and approached the dragon. The creature eyed him

critically, snarled from the side of his mouth. "It's all right," Hiccup hummed, keeping his distance. The Nightmare moved around him, curled his tail around Hiccup, came back on Hiccup's right side, curious now about this boy who didn't lash out at him, or shout at him, as the other people probably did. Hiccup took a deep breath, turned to face the dragon, whose red scales were an arm's length away now. He put his right hand out to the dragon's neck, kept his hand moving towards the dragon, laid it lovingly on the warm neck, the vibrations of his guttural breathing running life through Hiccup's veins.

Hiccup inhaled, kept his hand on the dragon, spread his fingers over the scales and rubbed, slowly, gently, rubbed his hand over the neck and up to the spines on the back of his head. The dragon purred. "Almost there," Hiccup breathed, squeezed shut his eyes a moment, opened them and inhaled. It wasn't like he could command the dragon to fire on everything, could he? The doubt came sudden and sharp. Dragons were their own person, they were individuals, they were distinct from their riders. And if he hadn't grown so close to one so as to make him know his mind and intent-

It was a wilder chance than he realized.

He grabbed the neck of the Nightmare, slid his right leg over the creature. The dragon jerked suddenly and Hiccup put more power into his step, settled on the creature. "It's okay-" he gasped, gently, not letting out the slow panic inside of him. "It's okay," he breathed, and stroked the creature. The dragon calmed somewhat, still edgy, and writhed his neck, clearly irritated by this foreign thing on it. Hiccup let his body calm, continued stroking the dragon, soothed him with his words while gradually working up his own confidence. If he got this dragon angry, if he let him go wild just a little, then he'd attack everything. There wasn't time to aim and fire, the dragon didn't know him that well, as his rider or as his authority. All Hiccup could hope for was a melee, a mad murderous rampage, full of fire and blood.

He inhaled.

Hiccup looked up, saw the watching Skirra Vællites and the handful of men with aimed bows in their hands. And below, within the circle of the kill ring, Heather's Council, watching anxiously, and Heather herself, coming closer now, a wonder in her face and a sureness in her step.

He felt horrible suddenly, to take them out like this. It's not like they hadn't done so much wrong, like they wouldn't do so much more terrible things, but killing them, outright . . . Hiccup was a man who believed in the value of life, that no matter how useless, or how much of a runt someone was, or how much someone didn't understand him, that he was worth something. He remembered his father, that story of his own past. He shouldn't be here if he didn't believe that.

He hesitated, a moment, and Heather was almost at his side. He chose to be rash, because it was now or never. He yelled at the dragon, suddenly, shouting angry and senseless, prayed the creature would go wild beneath him and do what he did naturally. Hiccup's instinct with dragons did not misguide him. The Nightmare reared, offended by the sudden turn in Hiccup's demeanor. Hiccup reached over and pushed the

metal clasp around the Nightmare's jaws. He reached further, pushed, yelled as his body refused to be used in such painful ways, and the metal ring clattered to the stone floor, the sound sharp and shaking. He grabbed the horns of the dragon, weak again, and dizzy. The dragon roared, and he felt fire, saw its golden white light, jet out of the creature's jaws. He heard women screaming, men shouting to get out of the way, he felt panic, shock, the sound of arrows flying, and the dragon below him folded in suddenly, his neck jerking low and his body scooting forward. He wailed, in pain, and Hiccup looked out, saw that one of the arrows had hit the Nightmare's chest. He reached down, grabbed the wooden stake, pulled and threw it on the floor. He jerked the Nightmare's head up, trying to direct it upward, to fly, but the arrow had done its job and the dragon was yelping in pain. Hiccup looked out, saw another archer readying his bow, ready to fire. "No- _stop!_" Hiccup screamed, and the next moment, Heather's Council was running towards him, somehow their pace so fast and heavy. An arrow came flying again and, barely missing his right leg, dug itself into the dragon. And another, pinning the end of his fur coat into the dragon's neck. The Nightmare yelped and Hiccup found himself surrounded, he could hear Heather screaming orders, and voices here in the ring, someone yelling in pain, and another man's angry voice as he shouted curses and yells of "why did we _trust_ him?!"

He was swarmed off the dragon, his coat ripping as they pulled him free of the arrow. He flailed against the big grip of those council members. He could see the archers still with their arrows drawn, aimed at the dragon. "Don't kill him," he gasped, lashing under the grasp. He was moving too much and his injuries broke open and he hissed in agony, knowing those fragile wounds were bleeding again.

"We will if he won't calm down," shouted the man with the bow.

Hiccup yelled, "You have to be calm, you can't be angry with a dragon." He winced, realized he didn't have to tell them that, and maybe the Nightmare would then finish them all - if they didn't finish him first. The men holding him pushed him to the ground suddenly, on his back, held his arms against the stone, trying in vain to keep him from flailing. Heather was standing over him suddenly, and in her clothing and skin, he could tell the dragon's fire had got her, charred her white cape. It was still smoking, still hot with fresh burns. She was flustered, angry and she knelt down to him, yanked his tunic collar up, sending shards of bad memories into his harried mind. The pressure against his wounded shoulder couldn't take the strain between his pinned arms and her sudden motion and he gasped thinly, went numb with blinding pain.

"You double-crosser," she hissed, and threw his head back on the ground. She stepped away and Hiccup rolled his head to the side, trying to cope with the torment of his untreated injuries.

He thought he heard something, out there, one of the men, his voice familiar, coming closer now, and now looking down at him from above. The dizziness in his vision barely made the image of Ragnar come to his eyes. He blinked, focused, and he saw that the man's face was burned, the skin pink and raw and his face locked in a scowl and a piercing stare of absolute and utter hatred. Hiccup, his mind dizzy and almost incomprehensible now, took some small pleasure in the

sight of Ragnar's scarred face, even as Ragnar yelled down at him and kicked him, beat Hiccup mercilessly with the scabbard of his sword.

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Hiccup must have gone unconscious at some point during Ragnar's vengeance. He awoke on the same place on the floor of the kill ring, his body aching with a stinging, constant pain. He was chilled, and his coat and riding harness were gone. His clothing felt ripped, moist, dirty and threadbare. He felt himself, deftly, hoped there were no broken bones. He put a hand to his lips, found dried blood there, and over his cheek, scratches of wounds and scraped skin. He felt all power gone from his body, from his will, and he lay there, breathing, calmly, consciously, because somehow inhaling was hard to do.

There was a thin growl suddenly, from not so far away. Another dragon. His heart sank, and he remained there, breathing, trying vainly to get his strength back. He opened his eyes and looked up, at the ring above, where he'd seen people before. But there was no one now. It was empty, strangely quiet, but behind him suddenly, he felt a presence, heard a soft footfall and the swoosh of a cape. He knew who it was, and it didn't inspire any hope in him.

"You didn't tell us everything, did you, back at Berk?" Heather said quietly, kneeling down by his head.

He swallowed, trying to get moisture back in his throat.

"Ragnar has been rash lately, but I can't blame him." She pressed a spot on his arm which was sharply sensitive and he lashed. She let go. "I kept my part of the deal, and you tried not to. I can still give Toothless over, and I still have your friends."

He exhaled forcefully, yearning to hope, to reach out and grab some light in the midst of the storm clouds.

"You have something special with dragons," she said, almost wistfully. "It's more than mere rules and tricks."

"So you noticed . . ." His voice was small, though still edged with sarcasm. Of course it was different. It wasn't with the pragmatism of war, to train them merely for usage as impersonal weaponry. The thought filled him with sorrow. And training them wasn't all about demands, rewards, shouting, threatening, or superiority. It was about understanding, compassion, honesty, and care. The dragons needed it like anyone else. Maybe even more, since they understood so little the ways of man. But if some people would only see that dealing with dragons was not so different than dealing with one's neighbor . . . maybe all this wouldn't have happened. He leaned up to look at her, squinted his eyes and whispered. "Maybe it's love."

She regarded him, avoided his eyes suddenly and rose, pointed out at the dragon. "You don't have a choice, go do what you do best." She stepped in front of him, put her hands under him and lifted him to his feet. He leaned on her, all things sensible begging him not to trust her, but he was so weak, so . . . tired. She was right, after all. He had no choice. Not right now, at least. He could be slow in training, that's what he would do. They made him this weak anyway, so

what did they expect? They'd get what they wanted, but it wouldn't be handed over on a silver platter.

She nudged him towards the dragon, a hissing Timberjack, and he limped forward, his good leg jumping with pain and his prosthetic, he suddenly noticed, bent somewhere at the base, making his gait uneven. The dragon looked dangerous, hesitant, and curious all at once. But it was pure, it was honest, and it was a familiar place he longed to go. "Come here," he said, a life slowly drifting into his voice. "Come here, it's all right."

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Hiccup moved in a strange surreality, from one dragon to the next, and he saw no one, no person, save Heather in the background, as she moved deftly along the walls, releasing the wild dragons and taking them back when they were calm and easy to handle. Hiccup felt his mind a blank, a strange escapism in the repeated beauty of seeing angry eyes turn to understanding and tenderness. On occasion, she handed him a slice of fresh, hot bread, warm on his tongue and soothing to the emptiness in his stomach. She gave him mead, and he took it, thinking that maybe the alcohol would make things go better in his mind, make things go easier, stop him from thinking for a while.

When she hooked the chain around his neck again, many hours later, she didn't pull or yank, waited for him to walk forward before she made her way to the outside of the Hall, through the narrow passage to the outdoors. It was getting dark now, and Hiccup blinked, inhaled. He was filled with a strange wonder, for he hadn't really realized the loveliness of a sunset in so long, it seemed. It was . . . beautiful.

The people were few in the town, and he was grateful. He didn't want to see anyone. It was quiet, still, and he figured too many of them were preparing for war, maybe out at sea already. Fighting his father perhaps. The thought made his mind clearer and an immense sadness filled his heart. The sun dipped below the horizon, casting orange on the water far away. The Skirra VÃ©llite chief's house was high on a hill, so much like his own, and the style was even similar.

A pang hit his heart.

She led him up the right side of the hill, and he could see hedged farmed land on either side of it, curving around the hill. But he wasn't led inside. Rather, she led him around the house to the back, where the ground got rougher, less grass, more rocks, and afar, a small shack.

Something caught his eye on the far left end of the hillside. Movement, raised wings, and a shadow, a beautiful silhouette of that round thin body and those lovely long wings. "Toothless?" he breathed, and his heart went faster, his mind single-focused and impatient. He tugged at the chain. The dragons were behind some fenced-in area, he could read in the silhouettes. Toothless was behind the enclosure, with other dragons. But the chain on Hiccup's neck held back, and he felt her hand on his shoulder, pulling him back. "I gotta see Toothless," he mumbled, "please let me see him."

"Not today." Heather's voice was quiet, and she turned him slowly from his friend, towards the small house in front of him. Somehow Hiccup expected that answer. He watched his dragon's silhouette mingle into the other shadows, as the darkness fell over Herkja. He had the sudden thought that maybe none of them would get out of here, not alive.

A faint small voice in his head told him not to think such things. He lowered his head, shut his eyes and breathed.

"There's someone inside for you," Heather's voice came again, and he looked up, at the entrance to the door. It was closed and didn't open. Heather stepped forward to it, and knocked, before swinging open the door and walking in. The house was warm, and to Hiccup's sorrowed heart, it was comforting, inviting, pleasant. The fire in the center was alive and bright, and yet it reminded him of this morning. "Who's here?" he asked quickly, looking around.

"Normally, Hervi and Noor are here, the farmers come and go." She led him to a corner, sat him down on the wooden floor, on a scrap of fur rug. There was the clatter of chains around him, as she latched the metal leash to a hook in the wooden wall, strung up another string of metal from the wall and clapped the cuffed end to his right hand. Heather looked at him, and he watched her face flicker with the light from the fire in the center of the quiet house. Her face was motionless, not hard nor soft, without sympathy and without hate. She kept the gaze a while, patted his shoulder and rose, wordlessly sweeping past the fire and heading for the door. He watched her go, watched her open the door and shut it. He stared at the closed black door a minute, his mind empty. He slid down, watching the fire, that beautiful fire, alive in his eyes, warm on his chilled skin, comforting in its simplicity and care. His back hurt too much to lay on, and his arms were in no mood to hold his weight. He sprawled out face down, turning his scarred, tender cheek to the floorboards. He shivered, and he brought his hand up to his face, covered his eyes. He was grimacing underneath his hands, but not from the physical pain that was still there, still humming in the background . . . but from something else. His body shook and he prayed that what he'd done could be unmade.

The door opened suddenly and Heather was speaking, gently, with an air of authority. "The others will be here soon. My guard is ready to kill. Don't try anything. As he did."

Hiccup felt a familiar presence in the room, and a life trickled up in his heart. But his mental processes were slow, and before he could place the name of the silhouette and the figure that bent down, gasping to him, she'd thrown her arms over him, whispering desperately his name. He found the name. Astrid. But he couldn't find the strength to raise himself. She slid underneath him, and she must have found his body a dead weight. Her cries increased, and he could feel her shaking under him, as she slid her knee to support his weary chest, and her warm, soft arm wrapped lovingly around his jawline. "Oh, Hiccup," she breathed, and pulled his head close to her body. He could feel her cheek against his head, and she rocked him gently, caressing him. She'd been so worried, and he suddenly realized how horrible his fate must have sounded to someone who didn't know. But right now, to feel her so close, next to him, her love tangible and near, he rested, lay his head against her arm and her lap, didn't say anything, merely succumbed, slept or at least

tried to, and listened to her voice, felt her breathing, closed his eyes and pretended, that they were still at home.

31. Chapter 26: The Hours of Captivity

a/n: Whoa. Long delay, haha. Thanks for waiting. We're getting close to the climactic segments of the story and I took some time aside to plot and plan, since I don't want this Act to end up loosey-goosey like Act 2, LOL. Again, my sister and I appreciate all you our readers so much! I hope you enjoy this update.

Thanks so much to Guy Fawkes522 for helping out with war strategy suggestions!

View the illustration at the official webpage. Put a period where the dashes are: [howtotrainyourdragon2 - thecomicseries - com](http://howtotrainyourdragon2-thecomicseries-com)
>or at my deviantArt gallery: [inhonoredglory - deviantart - gallery - 38855965](http://inhonoredglory-deviantart-gallery-38855965)<p>

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><p>How to Train Your Dragon II
>The Dragon Whisperer

Act III*
>**A Friendship Tested**

Chapter 26*
>**The Hours of Captivity**

The numbing spark of the Skrill's fire still stung under Toothless' skin when he was dragged into the fenced pen up on the hill. He was fighting, angry, yet his mind was still locked on the memory of the night before, the mud below the trees, the laughing Skrill and the boy he loved - snatched, taken, thrown down. How the boy had screamed and ran for him, but it was too late. The wall of humans, the heavy net, he couldn't move, his legs and wings entangled. Somebody jumped on his head and shoved his snout into the mud. But his vision was not blocked, and he could already see Hiccup in their filthy hands, struggling, scared, hurt, thrown into the ground, grabbed again, surrounded by dragon killers. The vicious girl, controlling them all, threatening Hiccup somewhere behind the walls of armored bodies. He couldn't see anymore, men throwing chains on him as he struggled, but he knew, she did something horrible to Hiccup. He could feel it, even if he didn't know what she'd done.

He spent a day since that night, writhing in his chains, scratching the earth and pouring out of his soul a hatred for this people that was borne from frustration, hate . . . and a certain helplessness. What had they done to the boy?

There were many dragons in Toothless' pen on the hillside, and in each of them the stress of captivity was beginning to take its toll. To see so many of their kind under such constraints gave some creatures a thirst for revenge, others a fear, many an anger and a rage that welled up in their dragon hearts and consumed their thirsty dragon souls. They had been captured from every part of the island, their freedom stripped and their wild dignity subdued by chains. On this island, the human pest had merely fought them and killed them,

and maybe it was better that way, than to be captured like a mere farm animal, awaiting whatever fate these killers had for them.

The last glints of sun had fell through the sky long ago. It was quiet and dark now, the chill wind sieving through the conifer needles, thick smells of prey, sheep and chickens, in the moist earth, and the audible breathing of dragons, ever quiet, ever watchful. The swell of land fell before them, into the town below, and the earth inclined gently behind them, into the forest's heart, rising up and beyond into the jagged cliffsides of a wild land, a land once filled with wild dragons, free creatures, proud beasts.

The Night Fury on the hillside snarled a biting, lamenting cry. The sound curled inside of him and burst into the night air, his hatred growing hotter, thicker, faster. They had taken what meant most to him, and he wasn't about to let them forget it. He was muzzled and chained to a barren tree like a worthless dog, dragged inside this pen of captive dragons a long dawn ago. Yet he struck out anew at his cruel leash, let the loathsome metal of his collar rub his neck raw. He reared, the chain clanged, the trunk shuddered. Twigs fell on his wings, the boughs above him shaking with the trembling hatred in his body. He heard a rising drone among the dragons, the knowing keenness in the Nadders and the soft hisses of the Snaptrappers. The Timberjacks hummed to one another, delicately, deliberately, eyes towards him, with a sudden meaning he couldn't misunderstand. He breathed hard and sharp, muscled his head down and hissed. He raised his back and stabbed his claws into the soft dirt as the chain clinked down at his feet. His chest was hot, terribly burning, and his shoulders ached with the spark of his old wound and the pulse of anger seething through him. He saw a Nadder leashed to his left, crouched and low and wary, the same meaning clear in her eyes. He stopped hissing suddenly, whirled to face her, his chain taut and her eyes wide and her head jerking back, and he gritted a harsh syllable, pierced his stare into hers. She backed off, for now. He knew what they wanted of him, had been desiring of him ever since he stepped in here alive instead of dead like their leader had promised. He was the domestic dragon after all, the traitor, the human-lover.

A shriek broke into the Night Fury's mind and he suddenly snapped his head up, his ears raising and a cry of recognition escaping his jaws. Skari was captured, but, was that him now? Being hauled into this pen with him. How ironic could these killers be? Toothless tensed immediately, shuddering suddenly, a shot of ancient rivalry pulsing through his veins, but it was more than that, it was deeper than that. Hiccup had wanted him to end the conflict, essentially, but that's how they got in this mess in the first place. If the boy had only let him finish Skari back then. They could have made it, _Hiccup_ would have made it.

The night wind was increasing now, a sudden cold layer gusting up the hillside and through the naked branches, blowing over the Night Fury's skin, rattling the chain hanging from his neck. He could hear the cry of the Skrill, guttural and broken, the distress and pain in it, the lost glory, afar in the distance, but coming close to the pen now. It might have sparked sympathy in someone, but not now. The Night Fury's soul heaved with a delighted strength in the feeling of fate reversed, yet even deeper inside, it was wretched pain. He swallowed thickly, his throat dry and his eyes shifting across the spaces between the fence bars of the dragon pen, fires flickering in

the night, voices of men, the image of the spiked body covered in chains and lashing in violence as the Skrill was dragged against his will. He felt the dragons around him turn their heads to watch the sight, apprehension in their movements, even horror. Toothless sniffed. Maybe they weren't used to seeing their leader getting roughed up by his enemies.

The enclosure shuddered alive as warriors wrenched the new dragon through the entrance. The Skrill hissed out the purest expression of wrath out of his muzzled jaws, his spiked body sparking in a mass of electrical activity that jumped along his confining chains. But the humans were smart, and each held his distance as they pulled the raging creature into the fenced prison. Chained dragons backed away from the cackling sparks, gave the new prisoner room, but the Night Fury butted his head into the fur-caped backs of men, shoving two warriors down as he snarled past them, the spark of the Skrill's lightning flashing in his face. Bulky hands grabbed at his muzzle, shouting and trying to yank him back into line, but he slammed his head out of their grasp, kept his eyes trained on the one creature he despised most of all. The struggle of the Skrill paused just a moment, as his eyes and the Night Fury's met. The two Strike Class dragons stared off, the hissing subdued and dangerous, separated just by the chains pulling at their necks, each mind conscious of nothing but the other.

I'm still alive, Skari.

The Fury breathed silence, his gaze penetrating and unmistakable, and the Skrill suddenly arched his back, hissed savagely. But the Night Fury held his head up in cool regard, his wings spread like the sky around him, a low and gratifying intent humming from his throat. _I'll kill you. When it's __**my**__ time, I won't fail._

It was said almost without the passion of anger, just the deliberate bitterness of the wind in his syllables, yowling cries in the darkness. A hardness stiffened through his spine, locking the surge of emotion snapping through his system. He felt the warriors back off from him, hastily regain their places to pull the Skrill forward, but Skari held his ground, his small yellow eyes flashing madly, hatefully, at him.

"Pull the dragons back." A woman's firm voice startled Toothless; he snapped his head to her sound. Skari was yanked at the moment of the command and Toothless roared in sharp displeasure, surged forward to attack but it was too late. His collar dug sharp into his chest as the chain firmed behind him, his chance slipping, his rival being taken past him, beyond him, towards another tree to be leashed like everybody else. A girl stood before him now, between him and his enemy. His body tightened as he faced her, his ears flattening against his skull and a hot rush pumping through his veins as he watched her, scowled at her movements. She stepped back suddenly, moved deftly besides the Skrill's body. Skari was half-lying on his flank, his body still heaving from the adrenaline of their encounter, but his senses quickly becoming conscious of this new threat, his jaws fighting the muzzle to growl at her. Toothless found himself taking a step forward, listening suddenly, as she spoke to the Skrill. She was gentle in her approach, kind and rhythmic in the way she spoke. "It's going to be okay," she soothed, and suddenly, everything clicked together in Toothless' mind.

There was no dragon trainer like his Hiccup, and there will be none such as he was after him. And yet in her he could sense something like a deception, an attempt at something so beautiful. But Toothless could read her heart, and where he read sincerity and humility in Hiccup's, he read cunning and cruelty in this woman's soul. He hissed, and in a horrible instant knew what she had been making his boy do. What _else_ were all these dragons here for? To kill and maim? Hiccup had taught him that Vikings were smart, and these people taught him that this same intelligence can be wicked.

She approached him and in her hands was something familiar, too familiar, unworthy of her filthy hands. She put out a palm, hummed those soothing words, even had the gall to smile at him, a feeble attempt at a disarming glance. He growled, let out a guttural hiss that shook his body, like an earthquake through his veins. For in her hands was the saddle Hiccup rode, the straps of leather that still smelled of Hiccup's sweat and Hiccup's clothing.

"I'm just gonna put this on you, Toothless," she hummed, coming around to his left side. He growled, slunk away from her, bunched his spine to leap at her, when she flashed her eyes, shocked, at the men somewhere around him, and he felt his leash lash at him, something hard and whiplike snap into his skin. He whirled behind him, searched for the man who dared thrash him.

"No!" the girl's voice shrieked, and he felt her run up to him, put a hand on his head. He lashed his eyes to face her, found her holding her palm out at the warrior with the thin whip, her feet firm against the ground, conviction in her eyes. "No one hurts him," she commanded, and looked down at Toothless, put her other hand on him. "I won't let them hurt you." Her voice was firm, convicted, and she looked into his eyes for a moment and he stopped fighting, paused. But then her eyes shifted and she threw the saddle over him, the familiar weight slapping onto his back, and he felt betrayed, lashed at her, pushed his snout into her body and she fell and he hissed, but then the leash pulled at him and his throat yanked back. He screamed, his feet flipping off the ground, and he writhed, found arms around him, clamoring over him, the leather tightening over him. Someone's weight landed on his wings, another on his body, more upon his wings shoved into the ground. There was shouting, pounding, the leather around him always tightening, squeezing. He felt the foreign hands latch the saddle securely on him, the rigging clasping across his body and the stirrups thumping over his shoulders. They were forcing it on him, and he longed for Hiccup, who strapped it to him with such care and tenderness, than here now, with the force that made it feel as if his saddle were the bonds that kept him prisoner.

"Get off of him!" her voice shouted suddenly, and he looked up, saw that hateful woman clamoring up from the dirt and mud, her hand still out and worry on her face. "Get off, don't you know what that would _do_ to him?"

He growled, tried to force his wings out from under those men, fought and never stopped fighting. She was right even before this happened, for he swore to never let that girl get on him, that she would never try to take Hiccup's place, if that's the game she was playing.

_So look at the human-lover now, _came a vicious, laughing snarl from somewhere in the pen.

Toothless snapped to the right, found Skari, a sly grin in his lisped jaws. The Skrill throated a laugh, leered at him. The Night Fury lashed a growl, snapped his jaws within their bounds, lashed and writhed and hissed. The girl put a hand on his head, cooed at him. "Toothless," she said, deliberately, calmly, "this is your new life, it's going to be okay."

The words were like poison in his mind, a living lashing poison in his heart, that she could say such a thing without consequences. Toothless writhed his head to the side, utterly disgusted, and caught sight of the saddle on him, the left stirrup, and realized with a horror that Hiccup's prosthetic attachment was torn off, ripped off, with only an ordinary footrest there now, matching the right one. So this was the game she was playing. He was sure of it now. They meant to do away with Hiccup, and they meant that he would never ride him again.

He looked up, saw the false sincerity in that girl's face, the way she reached out and dared to touch him, him the mighty Night Fury, the friend of someone so small and helpless. He'd saved Hiccup out of the fire, and he would not betray him. These people were not the people Hiccup had taught him to love. No, they were evil, deceitful, they were killers and he was not bound to them.

You're a disgrace to humankind, he hissed in his dragon's tongue, more as a statement than anything meant for their deaf ears to hear. You lie and you kill and you dare try to use us. He let out a growl, from the bottom of his lungs, loud and thick and heavy, and he flashed his eyes, boiled the fire in his heart and let it steam out from beneath his jaws.

The warriors were still upon him, still holding him down. A fire welled up in his soul, a fire that called back to things he'd almost lost in his two years of peace. It was a dragon's fire, a dragon's heart, and it lived in every dragon's soul. It was defiance, resistance, unrest, and it took the Night Fury's heart by storm, like a lightning flash in his mind. He'd had enough of this treatment, enough of these traitors to the species that had once given him so much love. He called now upon that old ancient tradition, that lived in the dragons' lore far beyond what each remembered, but all of them felt. It was the turning of the tide, the turning of the tables on their captors. It was deceit, it was hate. It was rebellion.

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Hiccup sensed a soft patting on his shoulder, faint and warm and far away in his drifting mind. He kept his eyes closed, somehow wanting to remain ignorant, as his consciousness slowly reminded him of where he was and what had happened. He jolted suddenly, in a gasp of shock, and someone held him down, hushing him, that female voice that sent hums of comfort up his shattered soul. He looked up, craning his neck towards her. There was a glisten in her eyes and dirt across her face, and in her expression, pain and worry and anger. He wanted to touch her, but a consuming weakness was upon him, and he slipped his head down, upon her lap again, gasped and sucked in a desperate breath.

"It's okay," Astrid soothed, and he felt her hand stroking him, tentatively, carefully, as if she feared she'd hurt him.

He tried to speak, found his jaw locked in some kind of tense exhaustion. He swallowed, rubbed his cheek into her lap and crawled his left hand up to her knee, his right wrist still chained to the wall behind her. It hurt his shoulder to move it, and he stopped mid-way, gasping. She reacted suddenly, pushed his hand away, to straighten it, and getting her arms around him to carry him somehow. She moved him to his back, made sure his right side was against the wall, and kept his head up with something soft and thick. His back sparked on him and he winced, fingered the air until he found her hand, took her tender fingers and held them close, gasping as he tried to breath, opened his eyes and looked at her.

She leaned down and cupped his face in her right hand, her eyes flickering, the water in them barely reflective in the shadow of the fire behind her. It made him frightened suddenly, to see her like this. His mouth went dry and he whispered, thinly, her name. Her fingers tensed as he spoke, pressed over his face and caressed his cheek and ear. He felt them coming near the burn on his left temple, and a strange panic took him and he jerked his head towards her, sliding her hand away. He exhaled, a simple thought running through his mind, that he couldn't bear to tell her now. It wasn't like he thought she'd think of him any less, but still . . . He just wanted to rest, to hold her hand and sleep. Despite the fire, he was cold, despite the stillness, his body was still wracked in a humming, constant pain.

"What's wrong?" he heard her whisper, and that hand pulled up his face again to face her. "Hiccup?" Her fingers brushed against his burn wound and he gasped sharply. He could feel her tense, move closer to him and release his other hand. He felt her hands shove up the hair on his left side, push his head slightly away, towards the wall. He could hear her gasp, felt the revulsion and shock in her voice and the shiver in her hands. He slumped down into the ground, gasping, still searching for her hand, rolling his head to see her again, the expression in her face now hot with an unfathomable anger. He whispered hoarsely, asked her to hold him close, tried to get her attention away from the brand mark, didn't want her to lash out at anyone, because he just wasn't strong enough to protect her now. "Please, Astrid," he whispered, gripping her fingers in a desperate moment before letting them go. He closed his eyes, opened his mouth and breathed, and suddenly felt her warm body against his, raising him up gently, her arms surrounding him, holding his head up and her chin over his right shoulder, gasping, crying. "What have they done to you, Hiccup? What have they done?" He wrapped his right hand around her, as far as the chain would let him, breathed into her shoulder, shivered uncontrollably and let his body lean against her hold, too tired to keep himself up.

There was a hum of voices in the house suddenly, and a shard of alertness swept through Hiccup. He stiffened, looked out and tried to focus past the light of the flames. The guard, standing now by the open door, was guiding in four other figures, strangers, and Hiccup felt his breathing increase, his lips mumbling something he couldn't make out, as his mind told him to get Astrid somewhere behind him. He jolted under her grasp, fumbled his arms around her and forced himself forward, shoving her to his side. He felt so weak, so helpless, and Astrid now was holding him as he crumbled to the floor. He gasped, the chain on his right hand pulling at him, suddenly taut. He pushed his left hand to the ground, his shoulder still sensitive

and sparking, leaned up and looked up, searching for the strangers. One of them came forward, and Hiccup recognized the face. The younger man from that place Ragnar had led him to, the slave who asked him to whom he had belonged. A fire welled up in Hiccup's heart, and he squinted, felt his face go into folds of emotion, before he relented, the stress too much for him, and he dropped his head down, breathed consciously. He felt the man kneel in front of him, peering down at him. Hiccup felt Astrid pull him closer to her, her breathing heavy.

"Hey, Hiccup," the man slurred, his voice wrangled like he had something in his mouth. "What's it like to be royalty around here, eh?"

"Shut up," Astrid snapped.

"_Vott_" said a vaguely familiar voice, afar, an older man.

Hiccup tensed, his hand balling into a fist. Anger, exhaustion, frustration jumped and burned in his heart, but he didn't look up, didn't respond.

"What?" the man, Vott, said, his tone full of mock innocence. "I'm only pointing out the irony that I'm in the revered presence of two men who will never be chief."

"I've had enough of your insults, Vott," the old man's voice hissed, and Hiccup felt Astrid step up suddenly, away from him. He grappled after her boots, the chain holding him back, and the leash around his neck now pulling taut. Something about the old man was familiar, and he suddenly placed his identity, that old slave who told him about the Death Spiral, the feud between the Skrill and Toothless' kind, Hervi, the man who said he once was chief.

"Who are you?" Astrid, her voice sharp and biting.

He looked up and saw her, facing down Vott, her pose as if she had her sturdy axe by her side. She balled her fist suddenly and threw it at the man's face, the smacking sound of impact against his skin, his head jolting back. No. Hiccup's heart burned white with fear. He lunged forward, panicking. The man got up from the ground, grabbed Astrid's collar suddenly, his fist raised. "Stop," Hiccup yelled. The metal ring around his neck choked on him suddenly and he gasped. There was a rush of people suddenly, dark and flashing shapes in the firelight, a foreign woman's voice and a thin laughing voice in the background, and he could pick out the old man Hervi suddenly holding back Vott against the wall, while the guard, his big hands on Astrid's arm, flashing his sword, glinting white and orange, and raising his voice above the scuffle. "There shall be no disturbances here." He paused and suddenly shoved Astrid to the floor, her knees buckling. And he took her right palm and slashed his sword swiftly across its surface.

Hiccup screamed, his breath leaving him. Astrid let out a yell as his ears burned with white noise, and the metal ring around his neck suffocated him, as his eyes landed on her hand, now red and wet. He lost air and he pulled back, pain grabbing him inside and his lungs bursting and his breath gasping and desperate. "Astrid-" he called out, and tried to reach her, pushing out his left hand, his vision mixed up with the orange of the fire and the red in his mind's eye

and the darkness and the shadows and the clap of metal and the voices. Astrid was at his side suddenly, Hervi and the woman slave hovering near, grabbing her and saying things, but Hiccup didn't hear them, pulled Astrid close to him and opened her hand, fighting the horror and the weakness in his shattered nerves. He wiped the blood, but it wouldn't go away. "Hiccup, it's okay." It was Astrid's shaking voice. He looked up and the pain in her eyes stabbed him, made him buckle into himself. The shiver in his body increased and a wash of coldness flooded him. He looked down at his stained tunic, ripped off a strip from the bottom and pressed it into Astrid's hand, the bright red soaking up into his fingers and the edge of his sleeve.

He noticed the old man suddenly, in his hands a stack of dirty white fabric, and the woman slave, that foreign person Hiccup had met earlier that day, in her hands a spongy cloth. The slave woman put her hand on Hiccup's, hummed something soft, and detached his hand from Astrid's, pressed the spongy material on Astrid's hand, while the old man wrapped it swiftly with the cloths. Hiccup felt his body close down on him, and he couldn't hold himself up anymore, his vision clouding and his only thought Astrid. He grabbed her, to hold her, to comfort her, to support him, to lean upon her. "I'm so sorry," he gasped, his voice ripped. "I'm sorry."

"Hiccup, it's not your fault."

He looked into her eyes, so close to his now, a force of strength in them, suddenly, behind the spasms of pain in her face. She searched his face with those eyes, took her hands and held his face. He could feel her blood on his skin and he gasped, raggedly. "Shhh," she whispered. "Shhhh." He shut his eyes, felt water in them, opened them and found the world cloudy and wet. She was holding him, guiding his head down, to the floorboards, resting his body on the cool floor. He was shaking, desperately, and he wouldn't let her go, kept his hand around her shoulders, slipping to her arm, his strength ebbing but his will strong. She slid down on the ground next to him, whispering soft syllables at him, stroking his face, which he suddenly realized was wet with sweat. He gasped for air, and she rubbed her good hand across his shoulder and chest. But this was wrong, this was so wrong. He took a deep breath, brought his left hand up and reached for her face, the effort to reach making his body warm and his muscles humming with hot strain. He opened his mouth, tried to give her words of comfort, that he was going to get them out of here, that they weren't going to harm her anymore, that they couldn't, not if he could help it. But the words didn't come out, and he only choked on his own breathing, and his hand fell, and spasmed with a throb of heat and the cold rush that chilled him suddenly.

"It's okay," he heard her say, as his vision blurred. Her hand ran through his hair and he closed his eyes, concentrated on breathing, still trying to speak words that wouldn't get out of his gasping lips.

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For the longest time, Hiccup lay numb on the floor of the slave's house, the fire a dull constant, Astrid's presence and constant stroking a timeless monotony, a warm monotony. He felt wet with perspiration, the small seed of hope in his mind still going unsaid on his lips. He tried to think, of the Plan, something clever, something that would work, because he wouldn't risk her getting hurt

again. But his mind refused to think. He was chilled, desperately cold, and he could barely move, let alone speak. Astrid gave him water, from a clay mug from the slave woman, Noor. The old man Hervi brought ointments to Astrid, and scraps of cloth and a tattered blanket from some corner. Astrid removed his leather belt, rolled up his tunic and, still whispering words of soothing, pressed the balm into his wounds, rubbed them on his bruises. Each time, he felt his nerves slowly gnawed, thick and painful, digging deeper into him, eating forcefully to his core. His heartbeat wavered, and he knew at some point he was going to pass out. He welcomed the fate, but when it didn't come, and as the pain became unbearable, he begged her to stop, that he'd rather they go untreated, at least today, than suffer any more. She stopped, put away the bandages and medicine, looked at him with those eyes with the hope behind them. He gasped in breaths, his face wet and his hand still shaking as he reached to touch her bandaged one. She used her good hand to drag the thin blanket over his small body, tuck it around him, but he was still cold. Noor brought him warm soup, good soup with meat and carrots in it, which Astrid tenderly fed to him, slipping the wooden spoon in and out of his lips, waiting as each time he struggled to swallow. He couldn't finish the bowl, couldn't find his appetite, but took some pleasure in watching her eat, and lay his head back, tried to rest, tried to regain some semblance of strength.

He closed his eyes and counted his breaths, squeezing Astrid's good hand in his own. He made his mind blank, concentrated on nothing, tried to sleep. He could hear the old man, Hervi, in the background, asking Astrid if he could speak with Hiccup, and Astrid telling him a decided no. That Hiccup needed his rest. He managed to ask about the kids in between times, how they were and what their captors had done to them. "They don't have much use for them," Astrid said, massaging his arms carefully, "but they don't need to kill them either. They're okay. A little bored maybe." She tried to smile. Hiccup appreciated the effort, forced a smile himself.

"But they're okay," she hummed. "I don't know where Fishlegs is." She stopped rubbing him. "He was following me til I found you, he's probably out in the woods someplace. Good for him to keep out, at least one of us would get away."

Hiccup flashed his eyes at her, alert suddenly. She went back to massaging him. "I didn't mean it that way, Hiccup. We'll get out of here." She looked at him, her expression unreadable, almost blank. He took it as a positive, relaxed, and tried to make his mind ease again. He needed her to keep hoping, because it was from her he was drawing strength now.

There was a faint knock at the door at one point in the stillness, and the sound made Hiccup tense. He pulled Astrid close to him, his mind getting lightheaded in the violent vision that suddenly shot in his mind. He wouldn't see her hurt again, no, _not if he could help it_. The promise was almost empty, considering his state, but he opened his eyes, leaned up and tried to see who was coming now to invade the brief respite. Astrid was holding him down, telling him to rest, but he mumbled against her, blinked and inhaled, pressing on her shoulder to stay up. There was a bit more strength in him, he could feel it, and he would use it, if he had to.

The guard rose from his dark corner, opened the door. The sharp creaking of the hinges broke the hum of the fire and the cool

stillness of the night. Hiccup braced himself, but it was only a small child who entered. He couldn't understand it, breathed out a question, his mind still slow.

Hervi, on Hiccup's left, jumped up, limping suddenly, probably because he moved too fast, and met the small figure in the door frame. The guard questioned the slave sharply, and Hervi took the small boy's hand, the old man's voice easy and disarming. The guard relented, threw the door closed. A draft from the open space fluttered the fire suddenly, washed over Hiccup. The child didn't seem like a threat, and Hiccup sank down into Astrid's arms, let her carry him down to the floor again. He closed his eyes, tried to rest again.

A small voice piped next to him suddenly. "Umm . . . hi." And then a sniffle and a sneeze.

He had the strangest notion that the childlike, quiet though peppy voice was speaking to him. He opened his eyes, exhaling, and looked up, to his left, where the voice was. Astrid had turned around, was facing the small boy which Hervi had let enter. His round face was in the shadows, the fire behind him, but even with the darkness in his face, he had a light in his wide eyes, a kind of happiness playing in his face. He'd seen that face before, somewhere . . . here in Herkja. He forced his mind to remember, the slave pen, the dark night, the cheerful smile on his face, the slavemark on the side of the young boy's head. Hiccup looked up, saw the kid's face scrunch up suddenly, and his lower lip jutted out and he frowned at Hiccup. "Not that I'm in the bestest of health either, but . . ." He sniffled again. "You don't look very well."

Hiccup cleared his throat to speak, but Astrid beat him to it. "These people here hurt him, brutally." She had a hateful lisp at the end of her voice, and she was almost breathless when she spoke. Hiccup clenched her hand tighter, whispered for her to please stop saying such things, in case they heard. Hiccup willed his heart to calm, as the panic ripped through him again. He heard the little boy's shocked squeak, and before he could react, tiny hands were brushing by his right side, between him and the wall, a small knee against his right arm, a little gasp by his ear. "Gee, that's horrible."

Hiccup inhaled, leaned to his right, saw the small child's face.

"You looked much better last time." The kid nodded, wiping his nose with his arm.

Hiccup cleared his throat. "A lot has happened," he whispered, his throat dull and sore.

"Remember, I'm Iggy," the kid piped, putting a hand to his chin. He rubbed his nose harshly with his hand, before blinking and looking down at Hiccup again. "Um . . . did you ever find that dragon you were looking for?" He sniffed, and a pang hit Hiccup's heart. He felt Astrid rub his arm, her fingers warm and tense. "Don't ask him, okay?" Astrid said, flatly.

"No, it's all right," Hiccup whispered, hoarsely, looking at Astrid before turning to the kid. He winced and exhaled, lay his right hand over his chest and inhaled. "They have him caged. He's my . . ."

friend. I was just trying . . ." He swallowed. ". . . to get him back." He stopped talking, motioned to Astrid for water. She rose, and the light from the fire fell on him again, the orange burning bright in his eye and warm on his cheeks. Iggy hummed, scratched his flaming red hair. "Yeah . . . my dad used to kill them things. Guess maybe you found a friendly one."

Hiccup squinted his eyes at the kid. Thinking about Toothless now, all they'd been through. "Much more than that," he whispered, and took another deep breath. Toothless was his life, and in a sudden moment now, Hiccup paralleled that fact with his own willpower ebbing, what he'd been doing for the dragon, the good and the bad. He swallowed, and Astrid came back, shielded him from the firelight, leaned down and gently pushed the lip of the clay mug to Hiccup's lips. He drank, felt the cool water flow down into his throat, a sudden irritation there, and he stopped drinking, closed his eyes. She pulled the mug away, lay it by his head.

Iggy watched him curiously, squinted his eyes and rubbed his nose again. "I wanna help, but I don't think I know all that much about scars and stuff."

"I've got him, you don't have to do anything." Astrid's voice was still sharp and critical, and Hiccup could tell that she wasn't going to let anyone, a slave, a child, no one, touch him. Iggy shrugged, frowned again and crossed his legs under him, somehow fitting in the space between his body and the wall. He cupped his chin in his chubby fists. "I could sing songs." He smiled, glancing down at Hiccup, hopeful. "That makes most people sort of happy, I mean even if my voice isn't the absolute best right now, but still . . ."

Hiccup closed his eyes tight, didn't really care if the boy did something or not. It was a nice gesture, and the kid seemed so full of life and happiness. "Okay," he breathed before Astrid objected. He could hear the child chanting, in a foreign tongue, in a flat but lilting and unmetrical voice, and at the end, a dip into something more familiarly native, choked with coughing, and then melding into something foreign again, in what seemed like a new language in a style he was not familiar with, and then the boy changed his tone, sang a few verses Hiccup recognized. "I dreamt a dream last night, of silk and fine fur . . ."

Iggy stopped after a couple minutes, wiped his mouth with his sleeve. "Yeah, I hope that made you kind of more cheery."

Hiccup swallowed, nodded tightly. "Thanks," he breathed.

Iggy pulled up his knees to his chin. "I totally combined a bunch of stuff I heard in that one. You know, songs people sang randomly around me, and my Dad's chants at the start. Gotta start with my Dad's stuff you know."

Hiccup nodded, trying not to put so much effort into thinking. The slaves were a motley bunch, hailing from everywhere, from so many more cultures and languages than he probably had even conceived. Somehow this kid learned so much.

"Excuse me, but Hiccup needs to rest," Astrid said suddenly, holding Hiccup's side and looking at Iggy. Hiccup thought about objecting. The kid wasn't really doing any harm, he didn't mind him. But he let

it slide, figured it wasn't something worth using his strength on.

"Am I in the way? Gee, why didncha say so?" Iggy jumped up, and Hiccup raised the fingers on his right hand, a sort of wave. "I'll see you around," he whispered, and Iggy's eyes perked. "Gosh, sure!" He put his one foot out and stepped along the wall, jumping down and out into the shadows. There was a bounce and joy in his step that was infectious, and a dim light warmed Hiccup's heart. He looked up at Astrid, suddenly appreciated her presence, grateful that he was not alone.

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Rune hadn't seen his daughter since their fight the night before. She had stormed out of the house then, by his own command, and he came to his decision. That maybe she wasn't ready for what he needed out of this. For years, they had planned, and she had shared his passion for revenge. Sometimes even more than him, when he was tired and when the world seemed all against him. In those times, she was there to support him, give him hope, and tell him that one day soon she will drive the weapon of justice into the hearts of the guilty.

But now, as he stood overlooking the docks and his armada heading out for the war with his brother, now as he watched his army, he realized she believed in something he didn't. She had made his brother's son a slave, their slave, and she thought that this would fix things, that this was justice. She had used his brother's ways of training dragons as a way to win the war. But what fate would reward such dishonor?

He spent the day being the chief that he was supposed to be in this time of war. He ordered his armies, marked out the maps and the plans of war. He warned them about the dragons, that Stoick has many of them, and that . . . they must use those dragons Hiccup had trained, and use them wisely. Stoick would attempt to land his ships, maybe use the dragons as cover fire. This must not happen. He spoke to his men of his brother's personality, the kind of warrior he remembered the man to be, the ships they had and the weapons they wielded, as was told him by his daughter when she visited their island in that charade of peace. He felt a detachment in his movements, yet a certain strength in his heart, and maybe it was because the romance of revenge had gone from him, and it was only the hard truths and dirty business left. Maybe it was his mind's madness again, for he could never quite tell when his mind was tricking his personality.

That night he walked towards his home. He needed to get this revenge job done, and then he could go forth and war against his brother. He fingered his sword, hanging off his left side, and remembered the day his father had given it to him, when he was eighteen, and how it would now spill a young man's blood.

"Dad-"

He whirled, found his daughter calling up to him from near the top of the steps outside the house, in the shadow of his home, the moonlight casting a deep, dark shadow over the face of the structure. He felt a hesitancy in his step when he heard her call, and he paused deliberately. His age felt tangible suddenly, different from the life

he'd felt while planning his battles. Heather had always said that he felt more alive while in war. It was strange to see her, after a day outside of her presence. He realized suddenly how rare it was that they were separated.

She stepped down to meet him on the steps. He watched her, and she waited suddenly, looking up at him. But he looked away, his eyes landing on the slave house, and the drifting smoke that snaked up from the rooftop.

"I've been with the boy all day, Father," she said. There was something hidden behind those words. He said nothing.

"Hiccup has trained for us a mighty army already."

He turned gently, looked down at her. He felt something angry push up into his heart, to see her, his own daughter, the one he saved out of the Viking raid, the one he'd spared from what Vikings do - pillage and burn and ravish. To see her speak the name of that cursed son of his brother's, with that expression on her face, of being pleased and contented, that tone in her voice - no hate, no bitterness, no sense of injustice. What had this killer done to her? What wicked charm did this boy have? That he could take hold of his own Heather and turn her from the goal they had shared so long? He leaned down to her, pressed his hands on her shoulders, felt the love pulse through him. He still loved her, but this . . . this. "You said you couldn't kill him." He felt her tense, and their eyes met. He kept his gaze steady, but the words came easily, not even in a whisper. It was from his heart, and he'd always been honest with her. He was mad, and it was not in his nature to lie to her. "You might believe that fate is something you can't control," he said, "_you_ might think that, but I don't."

"It's not like I believe he's fated to survive."

"Then why didn't you kill him?"

She breathed hard, and he watched her, watched the moonlight play on her face and in her hair. She didn't have an answer for him, as he expected. It sorrowed him, weighed down his heart with regret. He exhaled and turned from her, headed up the stone path.

"What are you going to do?" her voice was submissive, edged with apprehension.

He stopped, didn't turn back to her. "Kill him."

"He's _my_ slave." The voice was sharp, and it shocked him.

He glanced at her. The stare held, and he could read something unsaid in her expression. It was a belief, a conviction. Was she really afraid of him like that? "A slave is dirt, Heather. He's hardly a thing to value, and nothing to fight for. If I want to kill him, it's within my right to do so." His voice grew thick and sharp, and he breathed, found his lungs heavy, age coming back to him, away from thoughts and words of war. He looked up at the silhouette of dragons on the hillside by their home, those chained creatures she'd so wanted to train. "Go train your dragons, ride that boy's Night Fury," he added bitterly, and stepped up, his knee buckling, his chief's cape waving behind him in the air around, the night that even he

could feel was growing thicker with the coming storm.

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It was late, even Hiccup could tell, and he'd been in and out of sleep for hours. He could hear voices, of the slaves around him, even of the guard, Hervi still asking Astrid if he might talk to Hiccup, and Astrid still defensive, still saying she wasn't going to let anyone disturb him. Astrid tended to his wounds, pacing herself, letting him sleep between treatments. She bandaged his shoulder, wrapped fabric around his side, applied the balm to his cheek and even the brand mark. The slave woman, Noor, was making sharp critical sounds in the background, and he could even hear Vott, his laugh unmistakable, as he told jokes to some fellow slave, across the room. Time melded into itself, and he couldn't place just when and in what order occurred the bits of conversations he heard. He smelled bread one time, heard the splash of liquid and the tap and scrape of chair legs being pulled across the floor. There was the constant sharp voice of the fire, sometimes of the wind outside, seeking him and curling through the walls and under his blanket. There was the clap of boots, the guard's clear thick voice ordering peace and order, one time tapping his chest to wake him up, to concentrate on some new ordinance Hiccup couldn't remember anymore. He only wanted Astrid right now, her warmth, her protection, her safety.

He awoke one time, found her on the ground next to him, her metal shoulder pads off, her body leaning towards him, her head on his pillow, and her soft arm laying across his chest. He could feel her breathing, and he turned his head gently to the left. Her eyes were closed and even in the dim light from the dying fire, he could tell that wrinkles of strain and tiredness were lining her round face. He let out a soft breath, moved his right hand up to her hand on his chest. He was feeling stronger now, and his head was clearer, clear enough for him to realize what a mess he had been. He cleared his throat, was about to whisper Astrid's name, when he thought better of it, watched her body heave slowly, calmly, peacefully. She needed the rest, as much as he did. He really shouldn't bother her now. Maybe . . . maybe she was dreaming. He looked up, watched the darkness and the faint glimmer of the embers. He was still hurting, but that seed of hope in his mind was growing now, and he grabbed hold of it, desperately, at least to tell himself that things might get better. It wasn't something he was going to think hard about, lest the thin roots wither and die in his heart.

There was a sound suddenly, from the front of the house. He broke away from his thoughts, tensed. It was the guard coming towards him. He couldn't read the expression on the man's face, because it was so dark and the embers of the dying fire were faint and dim. But he sensed something threatening in the man's actions, and Hiccup rose, put his left hand over Astrid, watched the man's dim black eyes. Hiccup swallowed. "What do you want?"

The guard stopped in front of Hiccup, knelt down and tapped his unsheathed sword on Hiccup's knee. He unhooked Hiccup's chains from the wall. "You're going for a little walk."

"Meaning exactly what?" He kept his voice firm. He wasn't going to let it be easy for the guy to separate him from Astrid. She was waking up now, what with all the talking, and he could feel her groggy mumbles as her body nudged up against him. He firmed his hand

over her.

The guard hardly gave him a glance, reached out and grabbed his left arm. Hiccup pulled back, the grip strengthened. Astrid scooted up, and Hiccup glanced at her. "No," he mouthed, fast. The metal ring around Hiccup's throat pressed on the back of his neck, as the man pulled his leash forward.

"Where are you taking him-?" Astrid snapped, but Hiccup pressed her down. _Don't fight it. Please._ He looked at her, tried to communicate that in the brief dark moment. He could take care of himself, sort of. He just didn't want to risk her getting hurt. He was sure they weren't going to kill him. He was training their dragons, they had a deal. They didn't hate him that much, just to do away with him with no reason?

Astrid clamored up, but the guard pulled his sword out and pressed its tip to her chest. "One more move, and you're dead."

"You think I care about your threats?"

Hiccup winced. Astrid shoved the edge of the sword away with her bandaged hand. "Astrid, stop," he whispered desperately. The chain pulled at him again, and he yelped, curved his leg around and sat up. He gripped the wall vaguely and pushed himself to his feet. Astrid grabbed him, and the guard pulled again. "You're not taking him _anywhere_," she hissed.

The guard shoved his face at her. "You care so much about him?" He yanked again at the leash and Hiccup jolted out of Astrid's grip, fell into the big man's arms as he whirled the boy around, lashing a thick arm around his neck. Hiccup inhaled thickly, wasn't surprised when the guard pulled his right arm out and he felt the cold edge of the blade against his palm. "If you care so much, you'd shut up and I won't hurt him."

Hiccup pushed his head out of the man's grasp, tried to see Astrid in the darkness. The other slaves were waking up now, and he could hear a feminine yelp, and the big yawn of Iggy from one corner. "It's okay, Astrid," he whispered, trying as much to calm the situation.

She looked at him, those eyes darting and livid. He implored her, and she still stared at him, and he could tell she was trying to believe him, trying in vain to trust. He closed his eyes, looked at her again, with confidence, a sudden strength of conviction in his soul. If she didn't trust him now, and tried to defend him, who knows what might happen to her. The guard wouldn't see the value of Astrid's life, and he wouldn't be afraid to spill her blood or worse, if she went "out of line."

Astrid stepped back, at last, her chest heaving with the fire of anger and hatred. She was still staring at Hiccup, then snapped and looked down, clenched her fists. The man threw Hiccup's arm down, lashed his wrists behind his back with rope, and dragged Hiccup by his tunic's back collar out the door of the slave house. He could hear the other slaves asking her what happened, but he didn't hear her voice respond, only the cracking squeak of the door as the guard slapped it shut behind him.

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He tried to ask the guard what he was doing out here, who he was meeting. Was it more dragon training? Was he going to see Heather? Could he see Toothless? The guard regarded his questions with contempt, only said he was told to bring him out here, by command of the chief. "You better say your prayers little boy," he leered and laughed, that gurgle in his throat. Hiccup worked his face into a defiant scowl, felt life pulse back into him, and the guard pushed him forward again, down the hill, through the crumpled overgrown grass and the uneven rocks in the path that curved around to the chief's house. There were lights in the town below, glimmering and alive with activity, the clanging metal of war in the making. The sound of warrior's voices, and the scent of dragons, hot and angry. He felt the urge to comfort them, but most of all to find Toothless, to wrap his arms around him and soothe him. He had always been there for his dragon, and it burned his heart that he could not speak with him now. "Toothless-!" he shouted suddenly, but the guard snapped at him, yanked his leash in the opposite direction to Toothless' pen in the distance. Hiccup caught his breath, gritted his teeth and narrowed his eyes at the man, conviction hissing out of him suddenly. "I have a right to see him," Hiccup gasped, tripping on his bent prosthetic, trying to firm his foothold on the ground below.

The guard turned around, looked down at Hiccup. "Right?" He sucked at his teeth sharply. "You've got no rights."

"I'm training your dragons to save that Night Fury's life. I have a right to see him."

The guard pressed his fist into a ball and Hiccup prepared for the blow, but then a voice came from behind him, a voice suddenly and awfully familiar. Hiccup gasped. Dad? But it wasn't, no . . . The guard turned around to face the voice's owner, mumbled something and looked back at Hiccup, disgust in his eyes. "Go ask your master what rights you think you have." And he shoved his boot into Hiccup's shin, sending the boy to his knees. Hiccup inhaled tensely, sprawled his bent legs over the cold earth, looked up quickly and saw the caped figure. The guard handed him the end of Hiccup's chain, and Hiccup looked up into the man's face, those dark features in the shafts of shadow from the moon, the rounded nose, the thick beard glinting with white, the small black eyes. He'd never seen his father's brother so close. He'd never hardly known of him before this. It struck him suddenly how he should have been happy to see a member of his own family, that instead he was here on his knees, his hands bound and his spirit wounded, and this Rune, Rune Haddock before him. A chill spasmed through him, and that old story, as old as he was, came pushing back into his mind. That tale of his mother, Valhallarama, the hate, betrayal, his own birth, this banished brother who felt wronged that his love had died. If his father was right, and all this started when he was just barely born, and his mother died trying to take care of him, trying to save him from his fated death on the hillside, then how long had this man been harboring such hatred? How long had it infected his mind? And how could he not see past the things that could not be helped? Didn't he understand ever in all those years how a small child, a baby, couldn't kill anyone? Why did hate make so little sense, and how could it spread like an infection to the souls of others not even involved, to a whole tribe, to create a war that was sure to end in disaster.

Rune glared down at Hiccup, his shape looming large suddenly silhouetted by the moon. He commanded the guard to leave them, and in one swift motion drew his long sword from its scabbard. Hiccup breathed heavily, knew it couldn't be possible, not if they needed him to train dragons. This was a game, a trick, and he glanced up at Rune, let his face into the moonlight. But there was conviction in the older man's eyes, a hatred that was cool and hard. Hiccup didn't understand, but this wasn't Heather, and maybe he didn't think what he was doing was as important as his hatred for him, as his love for the woman he supposedly killed. Hiccup let out a breath, stared into the eyes of this man who could have been his father, took a chance and gasped, "I'm all you have left of Valla. Can you really kill me?"

32. Chapter 27: I Can't Look Out for You

a/n: Hey all! Thank you so much for your patience. My college has started so that explains a few things about the delay. I hope you enjoy this chapter, and the illustration that goes with it.

View the illustration at the official webpage. Put a period where the dashes are: [howtotrainyourdragon2 - thecomicseries - com](http://howtotrainyourdragon2-thecomicseries-com)
>or at my deviantArt gallery: [inhonoredglory - deviantart - gallery - 38855965](http://inhonoredglory-deviantart-gallery-38855965)<p>

* * *

><p>How to Train Your Dragon II
>The Dragon Whisperer

Act III*
>**A Friendship Tested**

Chapter 27*
>**I Can't Look Out for You**

The dragons were still humming with discontent around him, he could feel it even now. But it was war now, and the dragons felt that in their riders, and they were calm, focused, as their warriors were. But a moment's doubt could set them off, Stoick felt, and he wished his son was here to guide him with these creatures. Hiccup still had this way with the beasts, something special that no one else had. Stoick inhaled deeply, let the salty ocean air into his lungs. It was too late for wishing now, for war was upon him, war and all its ugliness, its anger, and its bonds of brotherhood. He'd lashed his ships together, one to the other, prepared them for the coming attack. The island wasn't that close yet, there was still too much distance between him and land, but ships were already coming, and flying creatures - dragons with riders upon them - coming to sweep down on them, blowing fire into their ships. There was shouting from the flanking vessels, rapid messages between the line of drakkars, coming to Stoick. He could taste the livid sense of panic in his men, especially from the outer ships. The mounted enemy had surprised him, and the last thing in war one wants is to be surprised.

Gobber voiced the words that were running through the chief's mind. "And _we_ taught them how to train dragons . . ."

But was it enough, that one day back at home? Training dragons wasn't a charmed thing, it took skill, and luck in some ways. It wasn't easy, and he had a hard time just believing that these people could learn the trick without practice. But still . . . what other explanation was there? The fact is they were using dragons as weapons, and he had to face them.

He turned from Gobber, stepped to the other end of his ship, the far end where war rituals were already under way. Stoick dipped his hands into the communal bowl of water and spit, splashed his face and breathed heavily, looked at his men. The dragons were a surprise, one he hadn't counted on when he rushed out here, perhaps as unprepared as his son, to face the enemy. "Mount your dragons, meet them with an equal fire," he commanded. "Get those dragons out of the air, don't let them get to the ships."

The men nodded. Spitelout came up to him slowly, and in his face Stoick could read a drawn-out sense of weariness. Stoick clasped a palm to his younger brother's shoulder, shook it gently. "Snotlout's going to be okay," he said, confidently. "He's a strong boy."

The man gazed up at him, pursed his lips. "Do you think they made it to the island?"

Stoick turned away from him, focused on his weapon hanging from his side. He grasped it and unsheathed it from its scabbard. That thought had passed through each parent's mind at some point in that day and the ones leading up to this battle. Stoick himself had spent nights up worrying, letting out all the worry and concern that a chief could not show to his men. He'd spent the nights praying, desperately, that his son was still alive, that the sea had not taken him, that his brother had not taken his small life by now. Ever since the sacrifice to the gods, he'd felt like it was useless, the gnawing sense that he'd come out this way to merely win a war but bury a son. He could see the thin face, the ruffled red hair, the skinny arms and freckles . . . a son he was being punished to have kept. Were the gods that angry for him sparing the boy's life so long ago? Or was this war a work of man?

"Mount your dragon, brother," he commanded, patting him one more time and whistling for Thornado. He threw himself upon the dragon, took to the skies, saw the extent of his damage. Ships, burning, men flailing in the waters, some swimming for cover, others dead already, more being attacked mercilessly by the dragons, and their charred, flaming bodies sinking down into the sea. Dragons fighting dragons in the air, claws clasped, men shoving weapons at one another from across the scaly backs, destined to drop into the sea and fall they did, man and beast. And the hand-to-hand combat on the decks of his left flank, the enemy boarding his ships, their blows focused and determined. He shoved his arm, motioned for men to move to the left, to support his flank. "Arrows and catapults, don't let up!" he shouted and flew towards the battle. He looked out, tried to locate the leader of this force. Show yourself, brother, he hissed in his mind. Show yourself a man and fight me.

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Rune was calm. He was about to exact his revenge, why shouldn't he be? But even with this conviction he felt the exhaustion that lived in his core. The war had done wonders to push him to action, to make

him forget how weak he actually was. He knew for a long time that his days were coming to a close, that the pain of Valla's loss had eaten away at him, his mind and his body. Heather had wanted to bring him life with this plan of revenge, and maybe she was right. Maybe the death of one slave could save the lives of many - his own peace and his daughter's, the goal that he had driven into his tribe, into his people. Maybe the death of one could bring her back, in some way avenge her loss.

He looked so small, when the guard brought him out. It was dark, so dark of a night. There was a wind, cold and biting, rushing through the air. The moon shone a bright pale blue down on the boy, his shadow sharp against the stone path that led between the slave house down to the Chief's. The grass was black in this light, and somehow it wasn't soft, but hard and uneven in bunches of spines on the ground. The clouds above shifted wildly, as the wind raced, blotted out at times the light of the moon. It was cold, frigid against Rune's skin, but he doubted it was the weather so much as his own illness. He was still a sick man, distracted maybe by the war and the prospect of victory.

The boy's hands were behind his back, and he was tripping, stumbling pitifully on the metal leg Rune remembered had come from that great battle which brought fame to this cursed child. He hated that redemption, he hated that black dragon which changed this boy's fate. Why had the gods picked him to make his tribe a better place, give his tribe peace? How could fate be so cruel?

The boy was on his knees before him now, and from up here Rune could see the damage the boy had gone through in his captivity. Heather had told him he somehow escaped his own execution. That he had been carried by a dragon's jaws and still came out alive, that he almost escaped with his precious dragon before that. He was a cheat of fate, and he was here before him now, small and weak and with clothing ripped and torn and stained with blood. Oh the child looked so innocent, so simple, so hurt. Vengeance hummed through Rune's heart. The guard handed him Hiccup's metal leash. Rune took it, bounced the metal in his palm for a moment. It was a beautiful moment, to have his brother's son, the heir to the Hooligan tribe, humiliated like this. This fate might have been enough for Heather, but it was not enough for him. His loss of Valla was no mere military loss, it wasn't something that could be fixed objectively, like a balance of the scales. It had to bite, and it had to sting like acid into the offenders.

He unsheathed his sword, breathed a prayer of vengeance to his dear love, Valhallarama. He prepared his weapon, and suddenly the child looked up, met his eyes. There were scars on Hiccup's face, wounds that were still black against his white skin, reflecting in the moonlight. But behind the shadows and the bruises, behind the expressions of exhaustion, the glint of anger in that harried face, there was something familiar in his eyes, the life in them-

"I'm all you have left of Valla," the boy said suddenly. "Can you really kill me?"

The words came as a shock, a horrible vivid shock to Rune's fragile mind. It was a lie, a sick awful lie from the lips of this curse. "No," Rune hissed. He heaved the sword down, and the boy hunched low, missed its blade. Rune could feel the race of his heartbeat, the

whisper of screaming voices in his head. He saw the boy, scrambling on his knees away from him, the guard coming up now, looking to Rune for direction. Rune ignored him, hauled his body towards the child, knelt down into the dirt and grass and grabbed the boy's collar, pushed his raw, angry hands into the metal around this slave's neck, shoved the boy's back into the dirt. Hiccup was squirming in his grip, he could feel the boy's desperate movement, the heavy breathing, but Rune kept his hand firm, pressed his fist into the boy's throat, kept him pinned. "You're nothing, nothing," Rune hissed, disgust rising in his throat. How could this boy, this hiccup have the gall to speak his love's name?

Hiccup gasped, looked up at him, that fire in his eyes desperate and rushed, even as pain ripped through his face. "What would she think if you did this?" the boy gasped, the voice fast and reaching for air. Rune moved his hands up to the boy's throat. Valla.

Was she watching this? Did she know what he was doing for her?

"If you still love her?" Hiccup's voice grew thinner, and Rune saw fear in those eyes.

"You stop talking about her," Rune muttered, shaking, his hands shaking, his mind like a storm on the ocean, dark and heavy and wild. Clouds shielded the moon. "You have no right to talk about her." He stared into the boy's eyes, watched them flicker in the faint light, so sharp in the night air, so close to him, after all these years, to have his hands on someone he'd hated ever since his own life ended so long ago.

The boy inhaled. "I'm her son," he whispered, a sudden calm in his small voice.

Rune heaved a breath, hissed through bared teeth down at the boy. That face stared back at him, and there was something like a shield in the face of that child suddenly. Something Rune couldn't get past, that he couldn't let his hands tighten around his neck. He moved his hands up, let his fingers wander over the boy's face, picked out his features in the shifting moonlight. He could feel Hiccup shiver under his hand, breath out and gasp. But Rune was searching, for what he didn't know, and he pushed back the hair on Hiccup's forehead, looked down intently into this face, ran his fingers through the soft, dark hair. He wiped the sweat from the boy's forehead, smeared it on his hand, smelled it and rose suddenly, kept his sword loosely pointed at the child on the ground.

Didn't Valla see what he was doing for her?

A shard of weakness hit him suddenly, and he pressed his sword into the ground, leaned on it. It was a hard day, full of war and tension, and now, to fail here . . . it was a simple thing, to drive the weapon into this young body. He'd done it so often before, to men less guilty than this one.

But that thought of Valla came back again, the fact that this boy looked so much like her, felt like her, smelled like her. Pain ripped through his heart. No, it couldn't be. It couldn't be . . .

Rune looked down at the boy, the embarrassing sight, his body splayed over the dark grass, heaving with nervous breath, his hands still

behind him, under him. Rune spat on the shape, shoved his boot fiercely into the boy's side and called for the guard. Hiccup yelped, turned on his side and Rune grabbed his leash, yanked again. "Get my daughter," Rune said to the guard. "Let this boy train dragons. Now." He looked down at Hiccup, saw the weight that was on his shoulders, as if the boy really cared what he was doing. The guard left, and Rune drew the leash closer. Hiccup resisted, looked at him, met his eyes again. "I want to see my dragon," he said, conviction pushing through the breathless voice.

Rune looked to the left, to the pen his daughter had them build next to their house. He could see the dark shape of the Night Fury and other dragons there, against the dark black sky. "I don't see a need for that."

"I'm training dragons for you, to save Toothless' life. I have a right to see him."

Rune looked down at Hiccup, at the fire in the boy's eyes, even despite all this.

Valla would call it spunk.

Rune licked away the dryness in his lips. "You'll have a proper execution after you train today, so what good would it do to see your pet?"

The boy paused, and Rune could tell he'd put fear in him. Hiccup breathed, the sound audible in the night. "All the more reason to see him," he whispered.

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"Toothless-"

Hiccup was breathless, his heart had gone through one too many changes in pace in the last ten minutes. How many times would he escape death? It was enough to kill him twice over already, and if what Rune was saying was true - and he feared it was - then he wouldn't live to see tomorrow. Escaping one execution by dragon was pretty incredible, but a traditional execution, a proper one? He shivered to think of the death penalties carried out by his own tribe, in the few times one of their own committed murder or rape. The wet slash of that axe against the throat . . .

But they'd shoved him into the pen of dragons now, his leash dragging on the ground, held by Rune a slight distance away. He could see Toothless, restless, fighting his leash to get to Hiccup, a hissing anger in his eyes. There was a fire in Toothless' heart, a hateful anger Hiccup had never seen in the dragon. It scared him, reminded him that this was a dangerous creature, a living fire-breathing animal - his best friend, the one he was doing all this for, the one he was suffering for. "Buddy-" he gasped, his knees still sinking into the soft, moist earth of the pen, a weariness in him that kept him from standing up. All the strength that he gained that night was wasted, and he hoped desperately that meeting Toothless would revive him again, enough to get through this day and maybe tomorrow, if it came.

The dragon pushed towards him, yelped when his own leash kept him

from reaching the boy, and the pain in Toothless' eyes gave Hiccup a shove of strength, as he stumbled forward and threw his face into the dragon, curving his neck to caress the dragon's snout. His bound hands itched and fought to escape their bonds behind his back. He just wanted to comfort Toothless, embrace him and soothe him. He could smell the dragon's wounds, the crack of dried blood glimmering in the night, the rash on his scales from where the metal leash rubbed against the dragon's throat. Hiccup's breathing went fast again, and he fought the nonsense in his mind, gasped out soothing words. "It's going to be okay. Trust me, Toothless. You'll get out of here. . . . We're going to make it." The dragon hummed, was nosing him as far as his own taut leash would let him, and Hiccup felt that the dragon was thinking, was putting together something horrible in his mind. He could feel it in the tenseness of Toothless' motion, the sharp purr in his throat, the way he at long last glanced down at Hiccup as a locked horror hissed through his cold green eyes. Hiccup searched his friend's face, looking for the calm, the comfort in it. His eye slipped, caught sight of the saddle on Toothless, his own saddle, tightly bound to the dragon's body, and the stirrup, the left side . . . his customized stirrup was gone, it was only an ordinary one there, and he could pick out the place where the leather was ripped and the metal hacked off, soldered and bent back. His jaw locked on him briefly, in anger, in hurt, and he stared at the contraption, the metalworking dirty and gruff, rushed.

Hiccup could hear the voices of his captors behind him, Rune and now a female voice, Heather. He could see Toothless tense, the dragon's body stiffen in front of him, as Toothless hissed violently from the leather strap on his jaws. Hiccup's own leash tugged suddenly, and Hiccup resisted, pressed his knees into the ground.

"It's time to go." Rune's voice.

Hiccup swallowed, kept his place.

Heather's quiet voice came through the darkness, directed at Rune, and even from here, Hiccup could tell it was subtly defiant. ". . . but I'm going to ride him, to war. You don't need to kill the dragon."

A mingled shock breathed through Hiccup's body. Toothless? He looked up into the dragon's eyes, knew they were talking about him.

Rune whispered back. "I never wanted to use dragons, I never wanted to use my brother's war tactics. It's an insult-"

"But it works. Haven't you heard their casualty reports?"

Hiccup inhaled sharply, broke his stare from Toothless. He took in a shaky breath, knew now that things had happened because of him which he could not undo, consequences that were permanent and horrible. Toothless nudged Hiccup's face, humming, concerned. He didn't answer the dragon, let the soft nose move into his cheek, breath into him.

"It's a disgrace to ride dragons," Rune whispered back.

"Don't you see the irony in this?"

"Look at them," Rune said, louder this time, and Hiccup turned

around, saw the dark silhouettes above him looking down at him and Toothless. It was like he was a spectacle, a thing down here, and disgust rose in his throat. Then Rune stepped up, gathered the chain in his hands, yanked at it and made Hiccup jolt backwards, throwing him off balance. Toothless screeched, pulled at his chain, vengeance in his eyes, hatred and anger at those people abusing his boy. Rune kicked Hiccup upright again, and Hiccup flung himself into Toothless, gasping and choking, breathing deeply. He could hear Rune's voice, quiet and convicted. "Look at him, that dragon cares too much about this boy. He isn't going to ride with you."

Hiccup looked down, on the ground, as Heather didn't respond to what must have been clearly the truth. "I'm going to try at least one time," her voice was strong, and Hiccup shut his eyes, his head leaning into Toothless, his lips by the dragon's large, narrowed eyes.

"I wanted the dragon hunt before. When you're done with the boy, I want it still to happen. I should have said it before, but I can't sacrifice my traditions for your changes of whim."

"_Dad_-"

"I trusted you for so many years, but . . . you've changed. This boy has changed you." He spat out the words with a sadness and a vengeance, mixed with pain. Hiccup winced, but the weight in his heart went back to Toothless. It was a delicate feat enough to ensure Toothless' life by Heather's will. But now, it was what he feared most, that whatever he did wouldn't ensure Toothless' life, not completely. The feeling of helplessness pounded into his heart, that horrible sense of chains on your will . . .

But if they wanted to fly Toothless . . . it was a chance at least, whatever they planned in the future. He leaned close to his friend. "Bud, I want you to listen to me," he whispered, barely audible even to himself. Toothless growled, hummed, the thin slit of his eye widening. Hiccup put out the hum of words between Heather and Rune from his mind, focused on his friend, focused on whispering these commands to him, because he knew it would be a hard thing to ask of someone who loved him so much, and he didn't ask it lightly. "If she flies you," he whispered, softly, "I need you to take advantage of it. I need you to use that, run away from here. I- I can't guarantee your safety anymore. I can't look out for you. And, Toothless-" He looked into the dragon's eyes, the depth of understanding in them. The dragon still didn't comprehend what he was saying, the realization would hit soon. He swallowed. "Toothless, you can't look out for me, not the way it is now. And when you get away . . ." He inhaled, saw the dragon's eyes shifting, knowledge drifting through them. "Don't come back. You did that once for me, ran into the Kill Ring and got yourself caught - but Rune is not my father, and I won't see you die. I can't take that chance. I've . . . taken too many chances for you already." Hiccup looked earnestly into Toothless' eyes, tried with his whole being to communicate to him what he meant, the sincerity of what he was asking. The dragon only stared at him, and maybe he knew, but didn't want to believe. But this was going to be a day of do or die, a day with no second chances. He could feel that, horribly, like an awful vision. He swallowed. "Do that for me, Toothless, just this once . . . trust me."

That was the last he got to speak with his dragon, before he was

dragged out of the pen, thrown into the hands of more guards that came to make him train dragons again. "Until nightfall," Rune said, gruffly grasping Hiccup's face and looking again into his eyes with an intensity, hatred, and . . . curiosity. Heather was with Toothless now, and he could read her body language, her trying to mimic the motions that he'd made the day before, with the dragons he'd trained. Guilt stabbed him suddenly, and he wanted to go back to Astrid, to sleep and just writhe in the pain of his wounds, because the mental hardship was worse than anything physical right now.

Did he actually believe he would not see Toothless again? Hiccup let the thought sink in. He'd told that to Toothless as a precaution, maybe it was another one of his rash judgments, brought on by sudden fear, helplessness. Rune led him along the docks, let the growing crowd of happy warriors jeer at him, throw wet, rotten things at him. Hiccup took it in silence, didn't watch them and didn't give them pleasure by whimpering. He stared down, tried to make sense of things, tried to revive that seed of hope in his heart. He'd already tried to ride out on a dragon. It didn't work. And if he tried again, maybe he'd just be killed anyway? That was reason to say what he said to Toothless. And if he trained dragons again, was sent to be beheaded like Rune wanted, then he wouldn't exactly be around to save Toothless if the dragon came flying back to save him. Toothless couldn't fly, not without him, and apparently not with him either, if the stirrup change meant anything. He couldn't help him. But the dragon could run, and the sooner he was away from here, the better.

He could see the sea clearly from here, from the vast breadth of docks to the horizon dark with storm clouds. The chant of war was sharp, the smell of blood and injuries, the pride of wounds of war, and the crisp cry of chained dragons, with bits and thick leashes on their heads, built in such a way that they could not open their jaws without the rider's consent. He'd given them peaceful creatures, and they turned them into slaves. Acid burned in his heart and he bit his lip. From here Hiccup could see the war afar, and the severity struck him suddenly, that from this distance he could pick out fire and burning ships, could imagine the line of ships lashed together in battle array, the attack of dragons on them, the skirmishes in the sky. Rune let him sit there, until daylight began to break. He said nothing, let Hiccup muse in his thoughts. Maybe he planned it that way, to torture him more somehow. Hiccup turned away from the horizon, looked down on his knees. He couldn't change what he'd done yesterday, he could only look for what he could do now. Training dragons couldn't be part of that, no matter the consequences. He couldn't let himself be defeated, not anymore. He shivered to think about what he was contemplating, outright refusal. It was suicide and he knew these people wouldn't stand up to his shirking on his promises. He had one hope, what Heather said, that she would fly on Toothless, out over to freedom. In the air Toothless was invincible. Astrid would make it out, and the kids, they were pretty safe in that dungeon. The war would happen right over them, and- and once Astrid discovered he was gone, well she could punch out that guard in no time, injury or no injury. He smiled inadvertently, wished he could be there when she gave him a piece of her mind.

He really didn't want it to end this way. His one goal in life had been to save Toothless, to be his dragon's hero. But there's something about wrapping your happiness in someone else. It makes you do things you wouldn't do for yourself. It makes you make choices

that are rash, stupid, noble. It gives you the greatest joy when you're with them, a happiness that could never be fulfilled in one heart alone. Yet if they were gone, nothing can fill the void in your heart. You don't want to leave them, because you love them so much in your life. But when does that love go beyond yourself? When does that love keep you happy even if you can't be with them, when it's just their safety and happiness that can keep you happy, even if you can't share in that joy, even if you can't share life with them anymore. Where is the line, and how does one cross it?

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I can't look out for you and you can't look out for me.

Toothless breathed slowly into the night air, the wind increasing now and sifting over his skin.

It was the most horrible, terrifying thing Hiccup had ever said to him.

He looked up and saw the low cloud deck spanning across the sea, the moonlit fog of receding night. It was clear over the town, burning lights soft and humming down below the hillside, the hum of sleepless, restless dragons. He could hear the sound of the chains inside the pen, that unmistakable clink full of anger and discontent and helplessness. Something like a moth brushed by his nose, and he flicked, felt his face tighten. He had no thoughts now, after the raging madness that had consumed him earlier, just after they dragged his boy out of the pen, manhandled his frail form. There were only feelings that wrapped into his body, stole the foundation from under his heart. He was hissing low and painful, his throat dry with suffering, his chest aching with hot disbelief. He had been caught twice within days, was chained and caged, yet he held out hope in the one person he knew would never fail him.

What had they done to him?

He could feel it in the black scars on the boy's face, the burnt bruises and the blood he smelled when he stroked that cheek and pressed his snout into that small shivering chest. The torn fabric on the frail body, the metal collar trapping Hiccup's neck - the chain, yanking, terrible unbearable yanking-

Toothless shut his eyes, his jaw locking, his soul breaking, stress and dread welling like a tide within him. If Hiccup didn't make it, if maybe Hiccup knew he wouldn't-

"Toothless."

Heather's voice shocked the dragon. The Night Fury suddenly found himself wheeling backwards, focusing his eyes back inside the walls of the dragon pen, snarling in panic as he realized one human had stayed behind. The last human he wanted, the two-legged vermin he loathed.

A passion of hatred flowed from the dragon's throat, his body quivering under his fragile state of mind. He whirled around himself past his leashing pole, growled and paced and shook his head without purpose, his eyes piercing fire at the girl, the other dragons humming and nodding their heads in alert. He saw the girl's hand to

her face, briefly there, her fingers swiping, before she turned to him and stepped forward.

"Please, Toothless."

There was strain in her face and her movements, and a strange, quiet anxiety in her voice. She wasn't even trying to look him in the eye, like something distracted her. He narrowed his eyes, felt a flush heat wash his face, his hind legs stiffening, readying. He moved swiftly and planted his feet squarely in her path, stood there defiant and yet unwilling to face her, tonight of all nights. Hiccup needed him. The way the boy put those words together, those last words - it was like a confidence, but one Toothless couldn't dare listen to.

Buddy, listen to me.

The words rushed back to Toothless, words so desperate and sincere that he couldn't ignore. The dragon had always trusted Hiccup, even in the face of danger, in the face of death and hopelessness. The dragon's throat knotted suddenly, his chest tightening, his heart locking in a sudden and tangible horror. Hiccup couldn't be wrong. He always had ideas. He _always_ had a plan. Toothless snorted. He'd disobeyed Hiccup's word before, but never when it was at this level of sincerity.

Fly with her.

If this was the break they were looking for . . . why did it sound so hopeless? If this was the clever plan, the brilliant idea, _why_ did it feel like desperation? Oh how he wanted to be free from this collar and this chain, free to fight, to save his boy.

But why did it feel like betrayal?

"You know, you saved me once." The girl's words startled him, made Toothless growl and peer up at her. She was standing still, in front of him, staring at him with that lostness foreign to her demeanor. There was a strange honesty in her voice, as her lips loosed and her eyes washed over him. Toothless held still, made no sound. It was so long ago, that now bitter memory, the cave-in on Dragon Island. If he knew then what he knew now, he wouldn't have leapt for her, wouldn't have shielded her or let the rocks fall on his body instead of hers. It was a mockery on his mercy, and it snapped shards of ice inside him. She should have died.

The snarl flew out of his jaws before he even thought, his teeth gnashing and his tail slashing swiftly across the pen floor, his intent heated and aiming, her feet close enough to reach, until suddenly he stopped himself. The spike of hatred fluttered, his growl collapsing into a pinched moan, and he closed his eyes and shook his head. His heart was tearing, fighting the knowledge of something so simple, so repugnant.

She squinted her eyes at him, knelt down and looked into his eyes. "Your boy taught me a lot about your species."

The resolve inside him quivered through his breathing, his eyes looking up, his anger pleading to escape, but he kept still suddenly. _Taught me._ The image of Hiccup's face came back to him, those

scars, the ones that he knew went deeper than the boy's skin. Is this what they were doing to him? Is that why he looked so weak, so terribly afraid? The boy was not a dragon like he was, he did not have a strength that other humans possessed. Is what they did to him enough to drive him to speak such words to his best friend? Toothless' soul seethed, and he let out a shaky breath, widened his eyes and narrowed them again, hesitating, pulsating. He'd never been filled with a greater desire to kill before.

"You don't have to die, dragon," the girl hummed suddenly, and her voice was laced with a pleading, as if there were thoughts and caring behind her cold words. Cold to him, who vowed now to never believe her.

Do this for me, Toothless.

The memory of Hiccup's voice came loud, sharp like a knife through the mingled hatred in his heart. But everything the boy said had been forced out of him, wasn't it? It all was a lie, a lie like her, and they'd hurt him to get it out of him. Toothless' heart shoved up his throat, but he kept back from growling at her, his own hesitation confusing him. She came closer, was up besides him now, petting him, stroking him, cooing him with words that came out of Hiccup's lips and movements that came from his mannerisms, but from her and it was sick, ugly, and it was deception. His growl that lisped out now was from disgust. But he didn't lash out at her, and when he wanted to gather the fire in his heart and shirk away from her touch, that voice kept coming back, that small boy's voice . . .

Why was his boy so sincere, why did he have to have whispered it to him, in a moment so honest, so . . . true. Why couldn't he believe it was a lie? It would have been easier if Hiccup were shouting, if he were reckless or angry, or confused, or broken, if he were senseless in his words or naive in his actions. But he wasn't, as much as Toothless wished he was, the boy's calm voice came shoving back into his mind, those words desperate but somehow mature, thoughtful in the extreme action they asked for. The dragon's heart heaved, broke like storm waves on the shore. Why did Hiccup torture him like this?

He let the girl's hands rove over him. Her voice was fast and cooing, distastefully close to his ear, and he flinched, her fingers unexpectedly stroking down the line of his forehead, petting his nose. He never took his eyes off her, had to turn his head to his left as he felt the side of her cape and her shoulder rub against the edge of his wing. Her face sickened him, the tiredness in her eyes yielding to a small brightness, a smile that flickered momentarily on her lips. He had to pinch his throat shut, stop the disgust from shoving up, and suddenly he felt the weight of his metal collar, the burden of the chain hanging down from his neck and tethering him to the tree, taking captive his feelings as well as his body.

"I won't let you die," the girl whispered. "You'll prove my father wrong. Toothless . . ." She intoned his name with a strange foreignness, awful on her tongue. He forced down the fire in his throat, growled and cut short his anger.

She looked at him suddenly, stepped in front of him and put her hands on either side of his face. He wanted to squirm, wanted to growl and shake her off of him. This was not like him, to be docile like this, to submit like this, to let such enemies get away with their

trickery. To let them be rewarded for hurting the ones he loved. Toothless wanted to scream, to jump out of his leash and attack this impostor before him, lick her blood from his claws and make her small body lifeless and crushed. He was a dragon, it was in his blood to kill and to murder. But those words of Hiccup came back, like a taunt now, honest and desperate, but chaining him. Why was he tied to this Hiccup, why was he tied to this love? He lisped a curse in his dragon's tongue, felt her hands on his scales again, her legs brushing his body. This vicious species would pay, for what they did to Hiccup, what they did to him. But bitterness had filled him now, bitterness and hurt and a sudden desperate longing for Hiccup. He would listen to her, do what his boy had wanted him to do, but not with pleasure, and certainly not with submission.

The Night Fury looked to his right now, saw the figures and spines of dragons there, the Timberjacks restless under their chain nets, the lone Nadder tied some distance to his left, preening the spines in her tail and watching him. Skari was wide awake tied to his tree, several wingspans distant and facing away, his eyes uplifted to the mountains, his jaws agape as much as the muzzle allowed. He was calling, guttural and plaintive and frustrated, and Toothless knew it was for his offspring, for the orphaned dragon young on the many hillsides. The Nadder was sneering at him, and he knew it was because of the girl, and the way he didn't fight back. The Night Fury's soul spasmed with rage.

Skari tossed his head, and that sympathy of parenthood vanished from his thin face. He had a laughing snarl on his face, one of mocking, for Dagr's continued treachery to the species. The Night Fury hissed, a hiss low enough not to make the girl frightened, not sharp enough to raise suspicion, but just threatening enough to get the words out that he wanted to say. You think I'm a traitor. You think I love blindly.

Skari leered his head forward. You thought there was a question? he hissed.

The hot burst of hatred chased up Toothless' lungs, as the girl stroked him still, and the conviction of rebellion throbbed through him. These people are not mine, they are not the kind I came to love. I'm not a mindless traitor like you'd have me made out to be. Sure, let them ride me, far enough from their axes and swords and bows at home. But what would a human be, without his weapon? Defenseless. Easy prey . . . You're so afraid of the humans, so afraid you couldn't even take advantage of them.

The Night Fury lisped the last words with a vindictive growl, made the girl beside him jump before he cooed in next to her, his hum of deception thick and strong. He could feel the Timberjacks take note of his reverse logic, the Nadder look to Skari, and the Skrill still staring at him, offended, intrigued, hateful. He finally spoke, his growl low and pointed. So the trained dragon shall tell us what to do, and the traitor shall lead.

But there was no pang from the insult anymore. Toothless was filled with a rage, felt his mind take on a wildness he hadn't felt since before his kind was enslaved to the great monster in the mountain. Stay here if you want, Skari. He hissed through his chains. I'd want you to.

The Night Fury felt the girl hum to him, felt a comforting lilt in her voice. He could feel her stroke him, nudge him, and finally, lift her legs up on him, slipped her feet into the stirrups, rest her legs on his sides. The weight was strange, but it wasn't disgust or terror filling him now. It was only hate. A beautiful, angry hate. He stared at the Skrill, his locked eyes unmoving. The other dragons were shifting now, their eyes, and maybe their opinions. For rebellion is a rage hard to stop once it gains a foothold in the mind, and the conviction of hatred in its leader's mind was a strong and infectious one. In the air rose the call of dragons, far and wide across the island, the caged and the leashed, the bound and the tame. A useful hatred was easier to live with and act upon than mere chained anger. Even if it meant swallowing one's dragon pride to follow along with the humans, at least for a while. In the end, there would be human blood spilled, and that was all the captive dragons wanted.

33. Chapter 28: How to Train Your Dragon

a/n: I won't lie, I love the title for this chapter, LOL! The painting came out pretty good too, so I'm excited! We wanted to get a chapter out before our grandparents come over for the weekend. I hope you all like the update! We're in thematically significant territory. XD

View the illustration at the official webpage. Put a period where the dashes are: [howtotrainyourdragon2 - thecomicseries - com](http://howtotrainyourdragon2-thecomicseries-com)
>or at my deviantArt gallery: [inhonoredglory - deviantart - gallery - 38855965](http://inhonoredglory-deviantart-gallery-38855965)<p>

* * *

><p>How to Train Your Dragon II
>The Dragon Whisperer

Act III*
>**A Friendship Tested**

Chapter 28*
>**How to Train Your Dragon**

It's a strange feeling to know that more than likely you won't be seeing your best friend again. He'd told his friend to leave him, he'd told him not to come back, when he got away. And he prayed with all his heart that Toothless would follow that wish, he was counting on Toothless' trust to save that dragon's life. But did it count as hopelessness? Was he being weak to act like this? Was this surrender? Daylight was breaking and thin hums of light drifted from the sun, behind those clouds that scuttled thin and gray over the horizon, the coming storm and the hum of thunder out there, of war and of weather. Somehow the rays of light were full of hope, as if they knew something he didn't know. Hiccup let his head down, as Rune led him forward to the shore. He just didn't know anymore, what he was doing, what was going to happen. He tried to tell himself that it was a brave thing he'd done. Sometimes the only hero you can be is the kind to step back and let someone else do what you thought you were powerful enough to do yourself. Maybe sometimes it is better to fail when fighting only would harm the ones you tried to save.

His heart ripped inside of him, shattered by a fear he never felt

before. It was the fear and terror that comes when you decide to step cold and knowingly into a quiet death without a struggle and without fanfare. He knew it was going to be the end of him once he refused to train their dragons. If Rune only gave him until the end of day, anyway, was there no scruples against something sooner? He wanted desperately to be with Toothless, to face this suicide at least with someone, anyone, instead of alone. But that was the point wasn't it? He couldn't have anyone, least of all the ones closest to him. This was something he had to do by himself.

Rune didn't lead him to the Kill Ring, instead brought him down to the shore, where the ships were heaving off from the docks. There was so much activity here, dragons and warriors passing him as if they were an everyday thing. Rune's hand on his leash was gentle, as he stopped on the rocky shores where the water lapped up to Hiccup's boot and metal leg, and where the slap of water against hulls of ships was sharp, near, and dangerous. Hiccup stared down at the gravel below him, the hints of morning light playing like a child on the wet stone faces, the glistening clear liquid alive with happiness, the smell of fresh sea water, salt and wind, that smell of a thunderstorm in the distance, coming near, to blot out the sun as soon as it saw fit. Hiccup closed his eyes, breathed it in, exhaled through his trembling lips. He could feel something in the air, it was familiar, it was dusty and warm. That irritation in his lungs- he looked up and his eyes shot to the horizon, where the storm was still brewing. He felt it in the air, that churn of dust and even in his feet, a rumble that was so faint that he figured he could only tell it was there because his senses were suddenly keen and fragile in this constant fear. It was volcanic ash, and it reminded him of the past few days ago, the mining at Dragon Island, the breath of smoke from that mountain, the rockslide and the threat of lava. It was so long ago, it seemed, and yet time did not stop for that mountain, even as his own life was shattered between the mountain's first warm breath and now. He felt so small suddenly, here in the middle of the enemy, in a windy vacancy where lightning and thunder edged the sky, and beneath him, nature threatening to unleash its own violent assault. That feeling of sheer terror grabbed his heart suddenly, and he locked his jaw, looked up and searched for Toothless. He just needed to see him flying, to see him free. He looked up again, took a breath long and deep and pushed confidence into his heart.

Everything was going to be okay.

The sound and hiss of dragons met his ears and he looked up, saw dragons flapping past him, over the sea, some riding back, bloody and shot, scraped by arrows and their riders, yelling with the whoop of victory or stiffly breathing through injuries. There were dragons who were taking pleasure in the flight, some he saw were still angry and restless, their flying uneven and jagged, crashing to the ground and rearing with a passion of still-tethered hatred. It didn't make sense to Hiccup - he'd trained those dragons. Each one of them he remembered, and he spoke with each, heard how they breathed and felt the cool smoothness of their scales. He left them in peace and now they were here with hatred, abused, with violence returning violence, from man and beast.

And then he heard a scream - a dragon's scream, and suddenly he knew what had happened with his dragons. Tethered to a metal pole by the shore, dragons chained and whipped, their riders shouting at them,

yelling for them to behave, to follow orders. He could feel the dragons' fear, their yelps of pain, and then the anger and the unfathomable enmity of the suppression of beautiful, powerful creatures. He couldn't watch the beating, but his eyes were locked on the injustice, a screaming desire to tell them to stop and a plaintive desperation knowing that the next step would be to tell them just how to train those dragons, and he had promised himself he would not give them any more of his knowledge. If they didn't use love now, would they ever learn?

"You need to tend to these dragons, they're unruly." Rune's voice came quiet and sharp above him. "I thought you had them trained." He leered down at Hiccup, a critical lisp in his eye.

The surge of disgust in Hiccup's throat almost made him choke. "You don't know the first thing about dragons," he snapped.

"I don't pretend to. But go on-" Rune pulled at the leash. "I have a war to lead. Get those dragons in the air again."

"I won't," Hiccup whispered, unsure if Rune heard, the last of his words drifting into silence as he remembered he had to keep stalling until Toothless was in the air. I won't, he breathed, wincing shut his eyes and lisping something sharp and senseless between his lips.

Rune grunted in clear irritation, and Hiccup wondered what was going through that man's mind now. He hadn't killed him right then for a reason, but he felt different than Heather, he felt so fragile, so weak in his desperation. There was something there, in his heart that Hiccup thought, as he gazed up at the man now, with the light of the sun fading over and breathing upon his face, he thought maybe if he could just talk with the man, he could reason with him, erode the violence and pride of revenge, or the senselessness of hatred. He inhaled through his parched lips, knew it wasn't exactly something reasonable to hope for, but then again, was escaping the enemy working? Maybe he had to face it head on, force his hands into the fire.

He shoved his left foot firmly into the gravel, the bend still there in the metal. Rune walked forward, towards the dragons, halted when Hiccup forced his neck against the pull of the clasp around his throat. "Can I just talk with you, reasonably?" he said, and firmed his frame, as best he could, his hands still strained and viciously aching in the bonds behind his back. "Without the shoving, without the sword, without the- threats." He caught his breath, as Rune turned to face him, that expression edging on disgust. "I'm not bargaining for my life," Hiccup gasped quickly, "I'm not even fighting. Just let me speak once, hear me out."

A gust of wind swirled around them suddenly, made Hiccup feel like it was just him and Rune there on the docks, the rush of warriors a faceless texture around them, the cool storm air chilling his core. Rune reached him finally, his frame lording over the boy, and that face locked into a hard, judging confusion. "What are you trying to gain? Who do you even think you are?" Rune was suddenly close to him, shaking his head. "You don't know what it's like to lose the love of your life."

"Does that it make it right to kill me?"

"I thought you weren't bargaining for your life."

"I'm not . . ." Hiccup let out a breath, his frame sinking. Maybe Rune was right, of course he was. But if he could just put truth into the madman's mind, he had a chance. He had to throw out all the man's defenses, make him focus on what he was doing, not on the threats or the act of battle. This was bigger than bloodshed, bigger than the momentum of revenge. "Listen, I expect to die," he said, because one half of himself believed it was true. "You're going to try to kill me, whether it's the right thing to do or not. Just- how would ending my life fix anything for you?" A sudden adrenaline shoved through his weak frame. "It won't change the fact that Valla is dead. Maybe lashing out at someone would make you feel good for a while, but putting out violence doesn't put anything back into your heart." He had talked fast, and Rune had been quiet, strangely. Hiccup inhaled, waited for the backlash, the yanked collar or the sword to his chest. But it didn't come, and Hiccup looked up to Rune, saw the face contorted, shaking his head, suddenly like a child, a fear and an anger in his eyes.

"What do you think my father went through?" Hiccup pressed.

"He cheated me." The words were hot, fast.

"Maybe because he loved her too. But then why didn't he kill me then, if I were to blame, if ending my life would solve anything?"

"My brother is weak." The chain trembled, and thunder afar vibrated the air. Someone shouted, and Hiccup heard the slap of a whip against dragon scales again. Hiccup shook his head, looked up into Rune's face, which was suddenly weary and old, contemplative, waves of denial and sorrow, suppressed anger in him. A shove of pity moved through Hiccup's heart. The man was so confused, the sorrow of loss wracking him into this madness. He just couldn't let go, he'd made it his life so long he forgot what reason was, what right and wrong were, even what Valla would want out of this. "You don't have to do this," Hiccup breathed, his voice shaking.

Rune looked up, suddenly, towards the horizon and the sun that was shielded by clouds. The storm was coming near, and a fierce wind clawed through the thick, graying beard of Rune, while his eyes remained unmoved, staring, those eyes full of emotion. He shook his head, solemnly. "I won't know if I don't try," he said, grasping Hiccup's chain tighter. His voice was vulnerable, almost frail, and Hiccup realized it was a fear that kept Rune going. "Someone has to die for Valla," Rune whispered.

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It had taken Fishlegs a whole half a day to gather the courage to leave the relative safety of the forest and enter the town. That was last noon, and a night had already passed since he last saw Hiccup and Astrid. He was shaking for hours after that incident with the Skrill and Toothless and the Skirra VÃ©llites, running in the dark, trying to get somewhere. He hadn't slept that night, and he was sure they were captured, the whole lot of them. He hated being the bastion of hope, but it seemed he was the last man outside the lines of capture.

It sucked in major ways. He wasn't as brave as he thought he was, especially when people's lives depended on him. But check the statistics- Astrid took on the bad guys with her bare hands, Ruff and Tuff stashed themselves inside grass baskets, Hiccup walked into a den full of his own murderers to save Toothless. Yeah, and where did all that bravery get them?

It was morning now, he'd slept under someone's eaves the night before, found himself scared out by chickens and dogs as the owner found out there was something snoring by his house. His plan? He couldn't get himself caught, he calculated that much. If he was taken then no one would be there to help anyone. The day before he'd poked around, afraid to voice the name of Hiccup anywhere in this place. He roamed the town, went among the people, felt the urge of war in the air, the laugh of warriors who suddenly had trained dragons by their side, alongside the dirty, tired people those same warriors shoved around and commanded. Fishlegs swallowed, feeling sorry for the poor slaves. He hadn't eaten for hours and at last it got the better of him, and he flagged down a tall, lanky boy tearing at a loaf of bread. He didn't look too scary like the others and maybe he would share. He was tailed by a pale-haired girl, who tagged behind him humming a native tune.

"Hey!" Fishlegs waved, "um . . . Could you spare a scrap of that?" He pointed at the bread.

The boy raised a brow, tucked his bread in closer to himself. The girl peeked her head around the tall boy, raised her brow in a different way, a fast excitement in her eyes. "Hey! It's a straggler. What, your parents threw you out? Or are you joining the war?"

Fishlegs stepped back. "Ah, no, I just been . . . busy, and I couldn't get a bite to eat."

"Give him a stab of that, Olaf," the girl hummed, slinking towards him. She looked slimy to him suddenly and Fishlegs leaned back from her. "You look a little chubby for being a warrior. But then my brother here is going into battle, with his excuse of a dragon, so if he can, anybody could."

"_Hey!_ My dragon's a good dragon. Get your facts, Tilda."

The girl stuck her tongue at him, and slapped her fists on her hips. "Anything for the chief and his daughter."

Fishlegs rolled his eyes. He didn't have time for this. Just the talk about dragons made his stomach churn in its emptiness. He missed home so bad, and he just wanted to get his friends out of here. _Can I do __**just**__ that much?_

The boy, Olaf, pinched the girl. "You know how much this war means to them. We all gotta pitch in."

"Hey, if you can't spare something-" Fishlegs started, still staring at the bread. His stomach had other ideas about what to do now. After all, he _did_ need strength to do any sort of fighting or scheming.

Olaf ripped off a piece, shoved it into Fishlegs' open hand. "Hey I have huge respect for our leaders. Why are you always so rebellious?"

Tilda rolled her eyes. "Who was cheering when they captured Hiccup, eh?"

Fishlegs almost choked on his bread.

"I guess you got over him quickly enough."

Tilda flipped the bread from Olaf's hand and shoved a finger in his face. "Hey, I know when to flirt and when to get down to business. This war is tough stuff, and I got as much in me as you when it comes to fighting. Besides, I didn't know he was a _Hooligan_."

Fishlegs' insides were all wrapped inside of him. The bread was having a hard time going down his throat. Just hearing that Hiccup was caught gave him jitters. Gosh, this was the _enemy_. He was scared, of the unknown, of Hiccup and what might have happened to him. At least they didn't say he was dead. He whispered a prayer that it would stay that way.

Olaf pouted at her, stared at his bread on the floor. "Look what you did, sis."

"Softie."

Fishlegs swallowed. He wasn't wasting any more time now. These people didn't look too scary, or suspicious. At least they weren't warriors with swords and axes in their waists. He handed his bread to Olaf. "Thanks for the bite." He looked to the girl. "I need to know where Hiccup is."

"So you're looking for the dragon boy?" Tilda lisped, her fingers curling around her hair. "Pretty little liar," she spat and Fishlegs blinked, her demeanor making him nervous. She pointed her hand up the town, towards a hill on the far side. "Up there with his new master, the chief and his daughter."

"_Master_?" Fishlegs gasped, forgetting to keep his cover. His brain was moving fast. Master meant slaves were involved, and chief - _daughter?_"

The girl rattled on. "Heather did him in, and good thing too. The creep thought he could get away in a place like this. Stupid idiot."

The brother snickered and Tilda shoved a hand in his arm. "He was _still_ a pretty boy, don't laugh."

Olaf pursed his lips, backed away teasingly.

Fishlegs couldn't believe this was happening. He expected Hiccup was caught, but a slave? That was worse than mere chains on your wrists, if his travels around the Archipelago told him anything. What if they'd done that to Astrid, or the twins? Or Snotlout even? He shivered. He still didn't have the slightest idea what was going on but it was bad, bad, _bad_. _He was going to freak out if these people didn't stop talking about Hiccup so flippantly. "Just tell me where

he is!" he demanded, putting all caution to the wind. This was serious business, and if he didn't see either Hiccup or Astrid in the next ten minutes, he was going to just lose it.

"Hey, hey, hey, calm down, okay? What's your hurry?" Tilda leaned into him and nudged him. "You got something against him too?"

Fishlegs' jaw dropped open.

She remained ignorant. "The kid's training dragons. They got him busy. Heard rumors about his style. Like I said-" She jabbed a hand to her brother. "Pretty boy's got strange ideas about dragons."

"Might not be so strange," her brother nodded without looking at her, kicking a rock with his boot. "They might actually work."

"Humph, yeah . . ." She clapped a hand on Fishlegs' shoulder and tapped his chin to close his still-open mouth. "Olaf here's been trying to train dragons the Hooligan way. Makes me sick. Just yell at them, I'd say." She laughed and Fishlegs squirmed out of her hands. He was going to be sick. This whole mess, talking to these people, the way they talked about his friends. He balled his fist and Tilda finally noticed something up. "Got a problem, Cutie?"

"Don't call me Cutie." Fishlegs' voice got low and he narrowed his eyes at her.

"Whoa, it's getting dark around here." She looked up and down him, motioned to her brother. "Let's leave this one, looks like he's volatile." She tripped away, laughing, her brother tailing her, slowly.

Fishlegs kept staring at them, his blood boiling and hot. He looked up to the hill the girl pointed out, saw the shape of a house up there, between the trees, its face lighted by the morning sun. His mother always said to say a prayer before doing something impossible. He whispered something desperate now and headed for the hill.

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Rune left Hiccup with a warrior, who pulled him to the unruly dragons lining the docks. Their scales were lined with red, the lashes of sharp whips and the hisses seething from their jaws was deep and thick, breathing heavy and the hate tangible. Pain weighed down on Hiccup's chest, and the warrior who was leading him suddenly got his big hands behind Hiccup, worked on the thick rope that kept his wrists together. Hiccup looked up, took in the faces that swarmed thick around him. They were faces, individuals, some men with beards, others clean-shaven and fresh and naive. There were middle-aged veterans, swords and axes hanging off their waists, and some younger men not much older than he was, laughing nervously, swinging their weapons as if they used them much before. He could smell sweat in the air, alcohol and the tar of the hulls, the salt of the sea. Sometimes they looked at him, and at the warrior besides him, their eyes going from interest to either disgust, arrogance, or indifference. Sometimes a slave hurried by, carrying fresh weapons, tending to wounded men, hauling in ships. They were always plainer, wore clothes not adorned with weapons or elaborate furs and cloaks. They glanced

at him and came to the same opinion as their masters, or so he took it, judging by the shaking heads and sorry glances at him when they took in his identity. Hiccup glanced down and took a breath. But this wasn't about his reputation. It was about Toothless, about his Dad, his tribe, about Astrid and the kids. He was the one the enemy wanted, and once he was gone there was no one they could threaten, no one they could use against him and the ones he loved. He tried to talk to Rune. It was his last move, and he gave it his best shot. You can't blame a guy for trying. But how much can one reason with someone so lost and confused?

A familiar voice broke the stillness in Hiccup's mind, and the warrior behind Hiccup paused as he undid the last knot of Hiccup's bonds. He clasped the boy's hands in his own big ones, asked gruffly, "What do you want, slave?"

Hiccup looked up, squinted in the sudden ashy wind. "Hervi?" It was the old slave chief, in front of him, a soft wool coat thrown over his threaded gray tunic, looking at the warrior behind him and gesturing with his hands. "I've asked the Master, and he said I could talk with him." He didn't even look down at Hiccup, kept his gaze firm and confident on the warrior behind the boy.

"The chief?" The warrior's voice was skeptical and his hands got tighter around Hiccup's wrists and forearm. Hiccup bit his lip, the socket of his left arm reacting to the pressure.

Hervi nodded slowly, in submission. "I asked his permission."

The warrior hummed. "Say what you need to say then."

Hervi looked down, at Hiccup gently, those eyes still softly deceiving as he looked back up to the warrior. "I'll lead him to the dragons. I can talk to him then."

Hiccup winced at the suggestion. He hated to start towards those creatures, wasn't sure how he'd stall, or what he'd say when the time came to finally be able to deny them the right to force him to do this. He tried to look up, for Toothless, but the warrior was coming forward suddenly, having released his grip on Hiccup's hands, pulling his arms forward, denying them the burning need to stretch and ease themselves of the painful relief of freedom. His hands were looped together in the ropes, the bonds now going loosely from one wrist to another. He could hold his arms to his sides now, and he took the opportunity gratefully. The warrior handed the leash to Hervi and stepped back, still close behind them, watching them. "Get it over with," he commanded, and Hervi nodded, put his hand on Hiccup's upper back and gently urged him forward. Hiccup glanced up at the older man, his eyes pressing in, questioning. He knew Hervi had been trying to speak to him all the night before, with Astrid holding him back. Hiccup glanced up at the man quickly. "Is Astrid okay?" he whispered, barely wanting to be heard. They didn't need to kill her, but still, if something had happened to her while he was away . . .

Hervi leaned down to Hiccup. "It was Astrid who asked me to find you."

Hiccup jerked his head up. "Why?" Fear pulsed through him.

Hervi shook his head, patted Hiccup's back. "No need to be afraid."

She's a strong girl, but she needs to know that you're still alive and safe. . . . and I need to know." He looked down at Hiccup with a heavy sincerity, words behind those aged, but strong dark eyes, a tenseness in his wrinkled lips. But pain slit through Hiccup's soul, and he opened his mouth to say something, shook his head. He just couldn't tell her what he really intended . . . She wouldn't understand, she'd want to do something, and she'd end up far worse than him. He wouldn't be responsible for that, not for Astrid. He needed her alive, and he needed her safe. "Tell her I'm okay, and . . . tell her to take care of herself," he said, his voice thick with control.

Hervi creased his brows, as if he knew he was lying. Hiccup turned away, breathed in carefully. "Hiccup," Hervi said, slowly, "I want to apologize." The words were faint, but spoken with a depth that made Hiccup look up at the man, the sorrow that darkened his face. "I could have warned you of their plan, before this all happened."

Hiccup swallowed, remembered now how Hervi wanted to tell him something back at Berk, a few days ago, a long time ago. "I was afraid," the old man breathed, and his hand on Hiccup's back balled into a light fist suddenly, a tenseness, a regret in that motion. He looked away from Hiccup, at the dragons they had almost reached. The crowd was thinning, as warriors cast off in the ships, voices beginning to become distinguishable in the mass. Hiccup inhaled. "I guess under these people, it's hard not to be afraid." He let his heart breath out its own subtle fear, raised his lower lip in regret and shrugged, looked back up to the old slave chief. "Is that what you wanted to tell me, that you knew?"

"About the assassination, yes."

Hiccup swallowed. He really didn't feel bitter against the old man. Maybe it was too late for things like that. He looked down vaguely, at his hands and the wrists that were tender, raw and red where the ropes had been wound earlier that day. He stretched them to the side, as far as the rope between would go.

"I want to help." Hervi's voice was fast, earnest. Hiccup stopped moving, but didn't look at him, side glanced the man. He was taking a chance talking to him like this. Why? "I have to do something," the old man continued, whispering. "I just- can't see you go through this. It's not justice, and maybe I've spent too long in the shadows." He exhaled, as if he'd released something that was weighing down on him for ages.

But Hiccup shook his head, let his arms relax to his side. It was a little late for heroics. His own moment of decision was coming sooner than Hervi would have expected. "What can you do?" he asked, not a question really. His voice was barely above a whisper, fearing the warrior walking lazily behind them was going to notice soon. "Are you willing to fight? Do you have that much power over them? Do you think they'll make it that easy to help me get away?" Hiccup inhaled, his breath tense and frustrated. "And is there even enough time?" He could feel Hervi waver, the old man thinking thoughts that were many and deep. The old chief let his hand off Hiccup's back, rubbed the chain leash that hung between his fingers. Hiccup pursed his lips.

"He's going to kill you after this, isn't he?" Hervi's voice was almost inaudible.

Hiccup looked up, at the dragons a few feet from him, their scaly tails wafting across the dirt and by his feet. "Yeah I guess so," he sighed, tired of being afraid, even as that fear colored the back of his mind, like a laughing ghost in his soul. He looked ahead, at a Nightmare and his owner, who curled the whip around in his hands, staring at the dragon with a wrath and hatred that Hiccup could almost believe was hopeless to erase from that face. The warrior glanced up, and then Hiccup saw the scarred face, pink and charred by burns, smooth with realization when their eyes met. Ragnar. Hiccup lashed his head down, could almost feel the whip and taste the end and how it would come. He looked up to Hervi again, quickly. They didn't guard her as much as they did him, he knew already she had a chance, if she just _left_ and didn't look back- "Would you tell Astrid to get out of here?" he gasped, and realized how desperate he sounded.

Hervi shot his eyes down at him, confusion in them, and a dawning knowledge. "You're going to let them do this to you?" he whispered, incredulous.

Hiccup swallowed. "I don't have a choice." His voice was barely audible, and he wondered if Hervi could even hear his fast words now. "I fight back and they kill me or my friends, I give in and they'll still kill me and take my tribe down with them. I've done enough damage already, maybe even killed people I know out there." He sucked in a careful breath, his heart wrapped up in a sudden clutch of pain. "I know the war is coming here, and I'll give my Dad a chance if I stop now. My tribe has dragons, and maybe now because of me the numbers are even between us and them. I can't tip that balance." He looked at Hervi, a sudden gasp of strength in his soul. Hervi's eyes took on a sudden gravity, and he reached out, put his old, wrinkled hand on Hiccup's shoulder. Hiccup looked at him, tried to decipher those eyes, the expression of sorrow and hope in the old chief's face. "You're a strong man, Hiccup," Hervi whispered, finally, his brows creasing. "You'd have made a great chief for your people."

Hiccup's heart heaved inside of him, and he suddenly wanted to speak with his father, make a better goodbye than the one he'd given him at home. "If you see my Dad," he said, breathlessly, "would you tell him-" His voice cracked on him and he looked down, breathed. Hervi nodded his head quickly, took the boy's shoulders gently in his hands and turned Hiccup to face him. "I know," he mouthed, and looked behind them, where the warrior was finally getting impatient. Hiccup firmed his frame and nudged his head towards the dragons waiting for him. "Guess I better go. Don't forget about Astrid. Make her leave." He stepped away from Hervi's hands, as the warrior behind them came up to him and looked between him and Hervi. "You've talked a long while," he said, gruffly.

"Slave conditions are a lot to complain about." Hiccup smirked.

The warrior narrowed his eyes at him, and Hiccup half-expected some retribution for his snark when a child's voice broke through the hum of warriors around them. Hiccup whirled, knew who it was before seeing the small form. He didn't belong here, how did he-?

Iggy was on his hands and knees, underneath the flapping, wide tail of a Nightmare latched to the pole. There was something wriggling in his arms and Hiccup was suddenly caught up in the sheer innocence of that round face, the way he struggled with his little living bundle and then when he spoke, the high, child-like pitch in his voice. "You guys are cruel to the poor dragons," he piped, "as much as I don't like them." The small child flapped forward as the creature in his arms - a green Terrible Terror - popped out and scampered away from him, towards Hiccup and the warrior, and Hervi, who stepped towards the child, mumbling, "You don't belong here, Iggy, how did you get out?"

"Oh shucks it was easy peasy," Iggy squeaked, rolling onto his knees and diving into the tiny dragon. "That guard is not so scary, not for old Ignazio. Ha!" He scooped up the dragon then looked up to Hiccup, the child only a couple feet from him now, still on his knees with the squiggling dragon in his arms. Their eyes met and Iggy sniffed. "I wanted to find you," he said, his wide eyes bright.

"Me?" Hiccup stared at him.

"They said you had to train dragons." Iggy stretched his arms out, the dragon squealing in his grip. "Would you train him for me?"

Hiccup took a breath, blinked. He knelt down on one knee, looked at the dragon which turned its eyes on him suddenly, as if it sensed a presence of authority. Maybe it was Hiccup's own mind creating sensations which were not true, but it seemed that the sound of war faded as Hiccup reached out and took the Terror in his hands, settled it on his raised knee. Those big eyes blinked, in question, in a kind of innocence like the child who captured it. Hiccup stroked the dragon's back, soothed him with words and soft hums. He felt a tap on his shoulder, and when he turned up, he saw Ragnar, the harsh burns on his face, the leather whip in his hands. "You're supposed to fix our dragons, boy."

Hiccup looked down to the whip, its long thin length and black body, stained with dragon's blood. There were others behind him, the olive fabric of their clothing dark in the sky that was gray and flat with clouds above them. He turned away from them all, turned his eyes upward, to the darkening sky, the windy, stormy sky and looked for Toothless. And then he saw him - that shape, the wide black wings which shocked him suddenly, because he hadn't really seen such a sight in the air since he first flew that beautiful creature: the noble, calmed flight of a Night Fury, sailing into the storms the species so loved. But this wasn't just any Night Fury. This was that dragon which was a part of him, the part he was tearing out from his own soul, and he suddenly realized, in this moment watching him fly there, alone and without him in the sky, Hiccup realized how far he would actually go for the safety of the one who gave him a place in this world, for the dragon who was by his side faithfully in good times and bad, for the creature who was more human to him, who understood him more than most of the people he grew up with, and for the friend who loved him without condition and without regret. He'd give his own left arm for that friend, he'd give his sanity, his freedom. He'd even given his knowledge, risked the life of his father and his tribe for the safety of that dragon.

But he was free now, and that was all Hiccup needed to know to press

on.

He turned away, looked into Ragnar's face, breathed in the cool and salty wind into his lungs, felt the gravel knobby and rough under his knee. "Let me show you," Hiccup said, and turned away, looked back at the Terror on his knee. "Dragons need respect." His voice rose, because what he was going to say was not just for Ragnar, it was for everyone there, and maybe to some it would mean something, more than just dragons or training or warfare. "Every dragon is unique, like his rider, an individual, like you and I." Hiccup felt a tension in the air around him, but he kept that strength in his voice, the strength which was gushing out of his heart now, and he bent down, let the Terrible Terror on the ground, smoothed its back with his hand. "You can only really train a dragon by getting to know that creature which is flying under you. He's got a personality, he's got needs, and he's got fears, like you and me." He looked into the eyes of the crowd, and to the faces which had turned to him, warriors and slaves still hauling war materiel to the shore. They weren't whipping the dragons anymore, they were listening to him. Maybe it was the way he said it, he himself felt different, like something unreal was pulsing through him, and perhaps it was because the struggle would end at last, and he was free. "To train a dragon, you can't just yell at him, you can't just make him happy with food or force him into submission with whips or axes. A dragon is not a slave, and a dragon has no master. You can't take vengeance on a dragon. He'd only come back and return it to you, because training a dragon is not about your will or his. It's about the bond between you, that you both can put aside the violence that defines each of us, and be one with that creature." Hiccup looked down, to the rocks under him, moved his palm deftly over that little dragon on the shore, felt the soft, warm breathing in his body. "Dragons are loyal creatures," he said, through tense lips, "if you give them that chance, and one day-" He inhaled. "One day, you'll realize that you'd do anything for that dragon, and he would do anything for you." He swallowed and looked up, saw that the black shape was gone now, somewhere in the clouds and the ash. "And . . . that's how to train your dragon," he said, his voice a whisper now. He looked down from the sky, to Iggy, who was staring at him with eyes full of awe.

"My Dad never told me that," he said, his voice small and grateful.

Hiccup smiled gently, almost laughed. "Mine didn't either."

Someone grabbed Hiccup's arms suddenly, hauled him to his feet but Hiccup was not surprised, kept his eyes on the little child who was jumping to his feet now, yelping as the man behind Hiccup yanked his head back by his hair, holding Hiccup down with a fierce grip around the back of his throat. "What was that all about, slave? Huh?!" It was Ragnar's voice.

Hiccup breathed fast through an open mouth, felt the tiny arms of Iggy wrap around his bum leg and his sharp squeak yelling out, "Hey that's not nice."

"Iggy-" Hervi's voice came near. "Get away from there."

"No!"

Ragnar yanked Hiccup's head father back, and Hiccup tried to wheeze in a breath, stifled as his neck bent backwards, Ragnar's thick hand choking him. He could feel Iggy getting to his feet now, and he brushed by Hiccup's legs. "Hey, big guy, pick on someone your own size, won't you?" The little Terror squeaked and he felt Hervi come near and grab Iggy, yelling in his own older voice, "You can't punish Hiccup for telling you truth."

"Hey let me go!" Iggy yelped.

"I can do anything I want, slave," Ragnar spat, and let his hands off Hiccup's head, shoved the boy to the gravel. Hiccup caught the ground desperately, the gravel spitting around him, and his throat choking with saliva. He coughed and caught his breath.

"So you think we just need love," Ragnar lisped, spitting on the ground. He unrolled his whip and Hiccup braced himself, shoved his knees up to his abdomen. The lash came fast and quick and Hiccup felt the fresh blood across his face, over his knee and on the edge of his neck. He kept his mouth shut as Ragnar leaned down to him, curled the whip around his hand. "Now get up and train those dragons, boy."

Hiccup smirked. "Not today," he whispered and leaned out from his knees, stared close into Ragnar's face. "I've told you everything you need to know."

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Rebellion was a force that was freeing somehow, to pour this hatred into a fire that was free to burn in the heart and in the soul. Toothless felt his body curl with that freedom, and even with that Heather upon his back, he felt in control. He felt it in the dragons around him, many more than he expected that took up his call of freedom. He could hear the bitterness around him, shouting into the air from dragons throughout the island. He heard them cry out that this was the motivation they needed, that they only wanted a leader in their hatred, a plan against the foes to organize their violence. He listened to the shouts of his fellow kind, felt sympathy even unity in it, a thrilling guttural sense of belonging. In their captivity some had forgotten their leader, hummed out the traitor's name with a praise to his deception. For often loyalty has no place in the heart of a desperate revolution. Others still looked upon him with contempt, borne of a deception of its own kind, Skari's lies.

But the Night Fury didn't care. He cared nothing for these taunters and the cruel hearts who greeted him when he first was brought captive to this island. The same greeting sixty summers ago, on this same land in this same storm, when he was young and his father was weary. It was an evil time then, and an evil time now. Except today, the evil lay in human hearts. As much as he hated Skari, in this case, he was right. Humanity was an evil kind, it was heartless, it was cruel, it killed its own for no reason at all. He thought about his Hiccup, that simple boy, with a simple heart, with no blood on his hands. He deserved to be avenged, he deserved the gushing heat of hatred that spilled out from his soul and hissed out into the air through his throat. What did they gain from hurting him? Or from chaining these dragons like himself? What gain, but to war upon one another? To destroy themselves, and bring the innocent with

them.

But he, a dragon, was better than this scum. His mind was consumed with the one thought, with the one image, the red-haired boy with the voice that gave him comfort and with the heart that would never abandon him. They had ruined him, and they would pay with their lives. The conviction screamed hot and terrible in his heart, with a passion that had never before devoured him. An old feeling of revenge thrilled through his soul, that delicious sensation of deceiving and delivering upon the violence in a soul. No more would they hurt him, no more would they have the arrogance to believe they could tame a wild creature like himself. He would have no mercy. And though he did not speak openly of it, he could feel the tenseness in Skari, because he had something that even that Skrill did not. He had first hand knowledge of how the human species worked, and if those two years with Hiccup told him anything, it was that humanity was a malleable breed, and now was the time to use that power of dragon intelligence, to give back to them what they gave to him.

He looked at the dragons, their eyes narrow and their bodies heaving in the passion of this new goal. He'd given them hope in the darkness, a purpose in the pain, and he could hear rumors even from up here, through the screams and shouts of dragons throughout the island, that they would organize themselves and attack in force, at once, upon all. Deception gave them a will, and the taste of impending human blood gave them a drive to fight and not merely survive.

His words were having an influence on the dragons around him, he could feel it, even if the ones close to Skari would not admit it. But they listened to him for simple self-preservation, for an instinct so simple as that. But to him, this rebellion was about Hiccup, and what they had done. He let Heather soothe him, let her hands stroke him, and didn't fight back when she replaced his muzzle with a complicated one that kept his jaws together when she held the leather straps taut. He was cold to her, his anger boiling under the surface. He would follow the words of the one he loved, but only so far as his hatred would let him.

The dawn was red around him, as the dark blue turbulence of thunderclouds and the unmistakable scent of ash wafted through the air, dusting Toothless' skin in that film he knew all too well from life inside the molten mountain, the tremors he felt faint in the ground as only a creature could feel them. They were far, but they were there, like the deep foreboding of an earth somehow aware of the darkness descending on the land and the sea. She cooed at him, jolted his stirrup in that way Hiccup would, a tenderness in her step, a lilt in her voice. His mind dazed in a trance as she raised herself on his back, cradled her arms around his neck. Her hands released that metal collar and let the heavy chain clatter to the ground. Her fingers soothed over the rash on his throat where the metal had been, her voice was kind as he was free.

But it was a sick gift. She was a thief, but a poor one. She tried to steal his heart, but could she ever conceive just how unfathomably far she had fallen short of her goal?

The Night Fury leapt into the air now, the open space of the roofless pen suddenly alive with the downbeat of his wings in the power of takeoff. The dragons, the pen, the hillside - all fell quickly into

miniature below and behind. His shoulder wound, half-forgotten in the confinement of captivity, now sliced into his core with every wingbeat. But it was a pain he could endure. After all these days chained and chased, days being done to and hurt by and forced to watch the one he loved broken down, he was finally in the air. He wasn't helpless anymore. He flew with her into the subtle falling of ash and dust that stretched far over the sea, that clouded the distance where man and beast met with war at the horizon. His was a battle much bigger than war, between him and this rider who thought it was a mere calculation to replace herself with the one thing that mattered in this dragon's life.

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Heather would have felt elated were it not for the sting of her father's words in her heart. He was right, that killer had changed her. Hiccup, the boy who wouldn't die, had affected her somehow. What was this inside of her that stopped her hand? Was it conscience?

But she was doing the right thing, wasn't she? So what did conscience have to do with anything?

The dragon's body was cool and smooth under her, and she let her hands smooth over his scales, cooing to him and letting the fast, hot wind wrap around her face and sift through her stained cloak. She knew that her father had tried to kill Hiccup already, that he was doing what she had done - trying to rid him of his life, but not from his own hands. The boy was unkillable. She knew it like she knew the sun was going to rise tomorrow. She had a feeling even now that Hiccup would somehow get away with his life. She almost laughed and she looked up to the sky, the lightning afar and the clouds, scuttled and fast in the atmosphere now, the coming sun making a beautiful mess of the sky. "What irony are you playing on us?" she whispered, and looked back down to the dragon, inhaling. That Hiccup had ruined their lives, and he was now still doing it. Who was he, why? It burned her, that question. Maybe her father was right, that she believed in fate. So where was fate taking them now? What was it trying to say?

She adjusted her foot on the pedal, remembered the training Hiccup had given her at Berk. Whatever happened to the boy, at least his dragon had company. As much as the creature had tried to kill her, she still wanted him. He was dangerous, beautiful. She felt the dragon's body rise up, into the sky, unexpectedly, suddenly, and she pulled back on the harness, wondering what the dragon was up to. The Night Fury rose, going higher and higher above, and a pang of worry jabbed into her heart. This didn't feel right. "Toothless," she shouted, "stop-" But the creature kept rising. She jabbed the stirrups but then she heard it - the vicious growl of that creature, the sharp, stinging hiss from between its jaws and in its throat. Fear yelled through her bones, and she looked down, saw the water so far below her. The dragon turned his head to look at her, and even someone who was never this close to a Night Fury could read murder in those eyes. She gasped, released her hands from Toothless, as the dragon lost all direction in the air.

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Heather could make him turn to the right or to the left; she could direct him up or down; but she couldn't stop him from falling.

And the Night Fury fell far and fast. A pure, unadulterated freefall into the sea. The dive began just short of the ships and the war, the island already distant. He could feel the close presence of people he knew, dragons from Berk he knew. He smelled the smoke of war, the scent of fabric and ship hulls burning, and of dragon's fire filling the air. In one corner he saw someone familiar, that great blue dragon that slept under the eaves of his own home. He was growling something, fast and harried, but Toothless chose not to listen. He had other business today. His wings tucked into the free fall, and his body stiffened hard. And when the sea's face rushed to meet him, he didn't sweep his wings wide and brake the horrific speed; there would be no dilution of maximum impact. The water slapped him hard and he expected that it hit that girl even harder. At this speed he knew it hurt the hardest.

His own mind stunned black, his lungs screaming at the cold influx biting into his nose. Blackness and water were everywhere. He was still plowing down at two-thirds the speed, his legs instinctually tossing in the murkiness, but that weight on his back was still attached, struggling fingers grabbing his neck skin and a muffled scream bubbling near his ear.

He thought the impact would knock Heather off. An impact had done that once before, with a great club of a monster dragon's tail and to a boy far worthier than the loss he took that day. When he dived into that fire and opened his jaws fast and wide and desperate to save, he never thought the consequences would be permanent.

But this time, there was no mistake, and there would be no salvation. Fire lit the dragon's soul as he twisted in the water now, his eyes blinking in the liquid light, searching swiftly, rabidly. The surface glimmered far and bleak above, the belly of the sea swallowing the light into darkness. He felt the fast flail of her body against his, the sudden fear in her harried movements, the helplessness. And suddenly, his ancient instinct sparked alive in beat with hatred, fusing as one, bursting out in a roar thundering underwater. Life pulsed in his muscles, shocked into his jaws. Her muffled cry increased, fear turned to panic. He lashed his neck against the pull of the reins, felt her feet fighting to get out of the stirrups. As if she thought evasion was possible, as if she could escape the penalty of her evil. Did Hiccup ever find rest under her eyes, was his suffering ever stayed or his heart healed from its bleeding? _Was he dirt to you, Heather?_

His snarl found her foot, the freed one floating into his vision. A single leg, snapping hard and urgent and upward in the froth of the disturbed sea. A boot small, delicate, but kicking and vile. His head snapped one more time, and the reins loosed, swept free in the water. His jaws flew open.

His teeth made contact just below the kneecap. There was a sudden jump in her body, a jerk of that boot into the roof of his mouth, and he knew his grip was keen. He turned his head to twist, his intentions burning, his eyes locked on the frightened lash of the body at the mercy of his power. Suddenly that body buckled down to him, the face briefly there and staring, struggling, stark white in a frozen horrified determination aflame in her eyes and moving on her lips.

Her fingers shoved into the corners of his eyes. The move was sudden, sharp, and effective. The dragon lashed in agony and almost screamed, air escaping his lungs, his face smarting in a grimace and his jaws releasing. His eyes shut on reflex, but he could feel her foot escaping, knew the swish of water rushing up him as her body broke free. A pained roar snapped through his clenched teeth. His legs hit the water, his wings slapped down and his body rose up. The frantic figure was reaching for the sky, darkest black against the surface light, her legs kicking, his limbs kicking, a race of life and death. But vengeance feeds stamina and it was easy to climb the dense depths despite the hurt in his lungs.

Riotous splashing broke above him, the girl reaching air, and her shouts punctured through the crash of waves. She had every right to be desperate, for she was alone, stranded in the sea. He rose up beneath her, swift, close, a black shadow below the waves, one intention coursing through his veins, a purpose unstoppable. A shudder slashed through him now, struck hard in his mind as his jaws clamped over her thrashing body. He brought her down, far and under again into the cold wet darkness. One arm was pinned inside his mouth, the other smashed into his face, squirming, fingers grabbing his nose, but he was unmoved. Her frame felt small and incredibly fragile between the fury of his teeth. He felt terror in her chest, pain heaving across her ribs. And there was no one to tell him to stop, no mediator to plead mercy. He felt hot despite the dark chill, delirious from the lack of air, and suddenly he knew the taste permeating his mouth, the salty red warmth pungent on his tongue. It was horrible. The body writhed as he choked on the taste, his mind sparking, his heart balking. He hurried to steel himself, shake off that feeling as his head tossed and he felt her limbs move in the black watery world. He couldn't see anymore, couldn't feel, but something was breaking. His fevered head flashed with images, with sequences of memory painful and specific. It was the cove at dusk and he was trying to sleep but he smelled that boy, saw him in the dirt afar and had to know what it was, because he never saw it before. The lines in the dirt, it looked like his father, and by extension, himself. He . . . never saw himself before, not like that. And it dawned on him, and he had to try, and the boy was right there, waiting, uncertain, cautious in his joy. It was beautiful.

And then that boy touched him and taught him to love this species called humanity.

The image cracked into darkness as a cold tremor snaked into his core, a coldness not from hate but horror. His anger wrapped into that horror, struggled in the dark and screamed in the suffocating loneliness of the sea depths. But she had to die. Hiccup deserved this. He couldn't let the impostor get away. He was a dragon, he was a killer, even if he was never this cold before.

The body was limp now, and Toothless let it go. It hovered gently in front of his eyes, his sight aware of the form, but his mind unbelieving. He didn't perform the usual predatory rituals, the sniffing and the nudging meant to detect life and snuff it out with certainty. Rather, he fled. The violent stroke of his wings and the pump of his hind legs propelled him upward, broke the surface with a wild gasp of air and a shuddering chill in the face of the unrelenting wind. The storm had come, the sky vibrating with thunder as the great drops of rain mingled with the ash and scattered across the ocean. Lightning split above him, and death cried below. The

dragon heard the call of ships, a strong pounding voice above the weather. It sounded strangely like Stoick's, like voices from Berk. But his bewildered mind had nothing for Berk, or the ships, or freedom. Hiccup had wanted him to escape, but he didn't tell him where. He struck off into the ocean, just pounding the waves, let the water collapse and break upon his back, never looking back, just rushing, thrashing, letting that flavor of blood from his mouth wash away into the tasteless sea.

34. Chapter 29: Death's Crossroad Laid Bare

a/n: A ***million*** apologies for being weeks and weeks late this time, and having such a sorely small word count from our traditional updates. The final weeks of my class messed me up, along with a Muse that fought me like a wild, bucking Night Fury. I honestly was in the dumps for days because I couldn't have that _snap_ moment of inspiration for certain viewpoints. Anyway, hope next time won't take as long!

View the illustration at the official webpage. Put a period where the dashes are: [howtotrainyourdragon2 - thecomicseries - com](http://howtotrainyourdragon2-thecomicseries-com)
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* * *

><p>How to Train Your Dragon II
>The Dragon Whisperer

Act III*
>**A Friendship Tested**

Chapter 29*
>**Death's Crossroad Laid Bare**

A thousand dark images flooded into her mind, slow motion, desperate. Heather felt the dragon pull her down, into the dark sea, those teeth latched onto her shin, digging into her skin. She gasped, lost air and felt her mind going blank on her. She didn't know if she had died or not, but it felt like death and she breathed a prayer to the gods, not anything comprehensible, as she fought the dragon in the sea.

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The black shape, it couldn't be. Stoick cleared his eyes from the growing ash, the drifting rain covering the battlefield, the ocean, like a death pall on them. But that figure flying in the clouds, rising higher and higher-

He'd flown out into battle not more than five minutes ago, had already sent a handful of dragons and their riders into the sea. In the two years since dragons became friendly with them, he'd learned quickly how to use them successfully in aerial combat. The battle now was at a midpoint, he could sense. The enemies had dragons, and they were violent, angry. He could feel something about them, the riders at least, because that's where his intuition lay, with predicting a warriors' mindset. They weren't using dragons the way his son had taught _him_ how to, and it was affecting their flight. They were using dragons fast, like bad ammunition, and if they didn't keep up

the supply, they were going to run dry on those war machines. He'd commanded a flank attack, with the better half of his men, a distraction to the forward thrust by the Skirra VÃ©llites at their front. That's when he flew out, shouting, that's when he saw that dark shape in the sky, those black wings and the red tail, flying up into the clouds.

At first he didn't believe it, it was too easy, too simple to see Hiccup flying out here towards him in the middle of a war, like nothing had happened. It's true he grew used to Hiccup returning virtually unscathed from the most strange and harrowing adventures, but this?

When it's been days since you've seen your only child, when you've spent nights dreaming up the worst, and when you did sleep the nightmares came - of that day he cheated Rune and then had him cast out of the tribe, when he married the woman of his dreams and she died after telling him that this child of theirs was special, she could feel it. And then the images of Hiccup, never quite what he wanted in a son, but his own son nonetheless, and finally his choice of that dragon over his own tribe, running off to his own sure death, and how could he take that? He loved Hiccup, with more than just a father's love. He was proud of him, and he wanted him to take charge of this tribe after him. Even if the past few days before Induction didn't bode too well . . . Today, things like that didn't matter, because there was unfinished business plaguing his life now, and his Hiccup had to go out and get himself messed up in it.

So when he saw Toothless there, flying erratically, he didn't stop to think twice. He wanted to believe it was Hiccup, and he flew down screaming his son's name because at his heart he needed to believe it.

"Hiccup!"

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There was a moment in that fight in the water, in that fight between a young woman and an enraged dragon, where the girl Heather believed with all her desperate soul that fate was indeed making her presence known, that maybe Hiccup himself had something to do with what was happening. She tacked it up to her delirious mind, the way water closes off your senses, the way your own blood outside your body makes you suddenly think of things that don't make sense - and yet, when the dragon had left her, and as the water cleared away from her, and she found herself floating, drifting along the rough and stormy waves, the pain somehow far away and unreal . . . the thought stuck with her, the thought that Hiccup would haunt her still, and the idea filled her with a strange, nervous fear.

She wasn't dead . . . yet. She coughed, felt the water lap up along her arms, smooth over her cheeks cool with water and wind. She couldn't even feel her leg, but she knew where the dragon had bit her, not completely though; she still had all her limbs with her. Apparently the dragon couldn't - or perhaps wouldn't? - finish the job. The fire in Toothless' eyes came back to her, chilled her beyond what the water now was doing. She had never seen an animal act with so much ferocity, with so much pointed hatred, and Toothless was just an animal after all, wasn't he? He wasn't so violent before. Was simply flying him as invoking of violence as capturing him and

chaining him? What was in that creature's mind, that he lashed out like this? Was it that connection, that thing the dragon boy had spoken of all these days? That maybe the dragon somehow had a mind of his own, and was offended by her forgery of training. How did he know she was only copying the boy? Wasn't it enough she gave him food and was kind to him? The boy worked magic with those other dragons, how could she not even befriend one already tame? But the Night Fury was Hiccup's dragon, and somehow that ownership seemed to lend his spirit to that creature, as if the boy's own weakness was channeled into a hatred in this thing he called friend.

Dusty ash was coming down, the smell of that volcano rumbling far away. She could hear the war around her thick and sharp, dragons spilling fire onto wood, flying arrows coming at them, the sound of warriors and death. She inhaled, paddled her arms and kept afloat. Maybe she underestimated those creatures. Those eyes were not mindless, they knew what they were doing, and it wasn't based in mere survival. That boy always had said that much, and she felt it in the way he acted around them. She never really believed it, but now, as his presence seemed to hang over her, and his dragons' eyes, the thoughtful, hated evil in them - it wanted to make sense to her.

There was a sound above suddenly, the wings of dragons, close to her, and a voice calling out the name of "Hiccup, son!" She opened her mouth, leaned her head, the water washing over her. Her movement made her unstable, and she started to sink, panicked and sent the water washing faster over her. "Hiccup-" the gruff man's voice came again, Stoick's voice, and she put together quickly what he thought. He would not be happy when he discovered his mistake. The wrath of a dragon had almost killed her, and now to face the wrath of man? This man . . . She looked up at him, but his dragon swept in suddenly, too fast for either of them to see the other, and she felt him grab her, in a haste that was definitive of war, the creature sweeping down, splashing in the waves, rising up again, his wings collecting the air and sucking in the vortex of wind in the dragon's shrill scream. Stoick's big hands held firm to her arm and she gasped as the motion tested her will against the injuries inflicted by Toothless. She latched her other hand to Stoick's arm, instinct telling her to hold on, as the wind waved her white cape deftly behind her. She mumbled something, a cry of fear when she saw how red and stained she had become, the color seeping through her clothing through the water soaking her. Stoick's arm tensed suddenly and he looked down at her, starkly. "You-" Shocked, horrified.

She opened her mouth, thought better of it.

"Where's Hiccup?" The man's voice was faint, breathless, not a question as much as a realization. She kept her grip on the man's arm, as the dragon roared again, as if he knew the tension in the air. She was at a loss, her mind whirring. Would he believe anything she said? Would he believe her if she said she didn't want to kill his son anymore?

Stoick jabbed his arm up suddenly, bringing her up, and she gasped as his arm gripped her clothing with a vicious anger. "You murderer."

"I did not kill your son," she gasped.

"What kind of liar do you think you are?"

She inhaled, looked into those eyes that boiled with anger, hatred, _love_ for that boy she tried so hard to destroy. Suddenly he just looked like a father, a father like her own, here in the windy vastness of the sea, in the dirty grime of war, the anger and conviction in his face. It was her own father, without the guilt, without the pain, without the life he now led. She looked into those eyes, without fear suddenly of the vengeance that she was sure that was coming to her. The wind was kicking up around them, the roll of thunder and the yell of warriors as the dragon flew into the Hooligans' forces, far from the Skirra VÃ©llite line. "Would you believe me if I said he's still alive?" she yelled, through the mad noise of battle.

"Why should I?"

"Because it's true."

The dragon descended suddenly, a sweeping flight alongside a ship, splashing down by the hull, the ship shaking to the motion. The dragon growled, swinging his body to align with the ship, as if in practiced motion, efficient for battle. To Heather who had never seen dragons act with such discipline all she could feel was Hiccup, his touch in this place, on these creatures. Stoick hauled her up on the ship, threw her on the deck, and she found herself surrounded by the enemy, faces shocked and confused, looking to their leader, who gave none of them a glance, but only looked at her, stared at her, his eyes hard and intent on justice. Heather didn't move, kept her place on the deck, stared back with the same intensity and confidence that she found in those eyes. She was a girl who wouldn't show her emotions, not to the enemy.

"Is that who I think it is?" drawled a one-legged warrior with a rock for a tooth.

Stoick firmed his hand on his axe, knelt down and leaned to her. She craned her neck to face him, her hand searching for her sword, but finding none there in her scabbard.

"If you didn't kill my son," he whispered, his voice hard, "then what have you done to him?"

"He's alive, isn't that enough?"

He grabbed her, his thick hand on her collar, raising her off the ground. "Don't play with me."

She choked on his grip, still chilled from her experience in the water, looked up at him, her voice thin. "What do you want me to say?"

He shoved her down, and she pursed her lips, expecting the worst. He balled his fist and threw it into her, knuckles on her jaw. She screeched, grabbed his hand and held it. "Where _is he?_" he shouted into her face.

"I don't know," she gasped.

"This is my son's life we're talking about, _where is he?_" His voice

broke angry over her, spit on her cheeks.

She lashed in his grip, and he pressed harder, the steam of his anger rushing from his soul. But what use would it be to lie to him? Did she have too many options after all? Those eyes of Stoick's spelled death and she knew it was her lot in his hands. It was over ever since Toothless downed her. It was planned that way, wasn't it? Wasn't that Fate? "My father has him," she breathed, without much care or thought.

"Rune?" His voice broke.

"He'll try to kill him, but he won't," she whispered, her fingers curling around his big hand, her mind beginning to feel the after effects of the past events, the sparking pain of Toothless' wrath, the pressure to her throat. She looked up to him, saw his mind working behind the anger in them. "Does my brother still have Hiccup?" he whispered, a fear and horror, mixed with anger in his tone. He didn't wait for her answer, raised his hand suddenly to his men. He shoved her towards one of the men who came forward, commanded him to take one of the prisoners they'd captured. "Send him back to my brother with a message," Stoick said thickly, his heavy voice laced with suppressed wrath. He stared at her and she inadvertently shivered in his glare. She knew what he was about to say before he even said it, and somehow it felt right, even as she knew it would burn her father's heart. She wanted this to be over, she wanted it all to end, and she was even contented now if Hiccup survived.

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The Night Fury had struck out far and fast and aimless over the ocean now, and it seemed suddenly like years had passed since he flung his fangs over that girl. He could feel the soft skin now, the way her legs struggled and fought under his jaws. She was scared and she deserved to be. He was a dragon, and this was the payment for the hatred he could read in her soul, for the scars he had seen in the heart and body of his precious boy. This was for trying to take him, for trying to ride him.

And yet, it was something only Dagr the Night Fury would have done. It was a wild move, one he felt came from a place within him deep and almost long forgotten, the same place which spurred him into rebellion against the human foe, the one which fought against the look in Hiccup's eyes, that look and that expression which told him to leave him and never return. It was a right thing he had done, but why this screaming in his soul?

It was madness, it was confusion, in his heart that was heaving from the violence he had just enacted to the love that was yelling for him to go back to his boy and yet not to return, and yet listen to what his boy had commanded him. He wanted to find Hiccup, and yet he wanted to believe Hiccup, trust Hiccup, when the boy told him to leave. But whom was he to trust now? The one to whom he had given his life, or the one who had just taken a life?

Toothless screamed, yelled a mighty dragon's roar in the middle of the ocean, with the wind swirling and lashing around him, the water cold and sharp against his scales, the white foam breaking on him, the skies darkness and filled with murder and warfare, other flying dragons, with riders on them, Berk dragons he could sense - and wild

dragons who were only pretending obedience. It was the beginning of the rebellion, he could feel in his gut, the way those island dragons swept and turned back at their riders, in their dragon eyes a slick deception, and only in a few the same look which Berk dragons so peacefully sported, only in a few who were truly at one with their riders.

Toothless turned his head down, let the water wash over him, and he sensed the movement within the sea, the calm, consistent wave of water under him, not the crashing waves or the riotous sea, but another motion - a hushed, pulsing motion, warm and almost peaceful in the madness. He sank lower, let the blackness take him, opened his eyes in the salty prison and looked, saw that beneath the ships there lay the humming mass of lights, the pulsing dance of the water dragons, their green and yellow glow soft, gentle under the war ships, as they licked the blood of war from the wash of the ocean, their collective mass breaking into contractions as they swam, as they swarmed with the pulse of the sea.

Toothless kicked his legs, towards them, their strange calm drawing him, tempting him. They were dancing now, not just to the sea, not just to the pulse of the storm. It was a ritual now, the way their bodies moved as one, slowly rising, quickly falling, a chant in an old, old dragon's tongue, a chant of memory, of remembrance, of mourning. Toothless felt his body tense suddenly, and in the dark of the sea, staring into the hum of lights before him, he knew what they were speaking of, what their sorrowed bodies were trying to convey. In that old language he heard it, the language the Great Dragon had spoken long before even he had first met him, long before the first battle between Toothless' father and the Skrill, long before he grew to love and respect that Great Dragon as his own father, the one who cared for him, warmed him with his large body against the cold of the sea and of a life lost of one's parents. The water dragons did not notice Toothless in their chant of sadness, but in their lonely service, they told Dagr all he needed to know - that this old dragon, who had lived so long, so well, and who had maybe a chance to love a human as he did, if he had but time to learn, that he was gone, that he had been killed, that by dragon's fire and man's weapons the majestic creature had passed from this world and into the unknown.

Toothless listened a while, heard the story repeat itself in the chant. He was gone, gone forever. Toothless rose, took in the air of the troubled sky, the rainy, ashy sky. Something new breathed within him, death so violent and then one so tenderly remembered. His own actions and one done by an evil dragon and the violent species called mankind. And suddenly the strong conviction that no matter what his boy had told him, he could not let him die, and he would never chant to entomb a boy in an old dragon's tongue.

He turned and let the crashing waves guide him, back to the island, to the enemies, to Hiccup.

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It was the only comfort against the vengeance of Ragnar's whip, the knowledge that he had done his best and that no more death would befall by his hand. Hiccup hated the thought that his Dad would find him here, killed without honor on the beach, without a sword in his hand or even his hands free. At least Hervi said he'd tell his story,

but he longed to see Astrid now, to tell her himself, to give her some kind of goodbye. The last he'd seen of her was to tell her he was going to be fine, and he thought he could protect her. The tears stung in his eyes and Ragnar shouted at him for the tenth time if he would stand up and do his dragon training.

"No," Hiccup hissed for the tenth time, and for the tenth time, Ragnar lashed the sharp leather into the back of the tense, small shape under his mercy.

Hiccup clawed the earth, the small, wet pebbles squeezing out of his gasping hand. Blood was swelling across his back, shards across his clothing, over his cheek and the bare skin of his neck and his hands. He shoved his face into the sandy wet ground, wincing, telling himself this was all worthwhile. He could hear Hervi in the background, but the words were only a muddle in his mind. A trail of red found its way across his forehead, and slowly like a tear pooled into the corner of his eye. He moved his tired hand to wipe it away but the whip bit him again, made him yell when its edge broke on his cheek, cutting into the back of his hand. Ragnar laughed, seemed to take pleasure in scarring him, and it made Hiccup sick to be taking it.

"Changed your mind about dragons now, slave?" he taunted, his voice close as Hiccup leaned up, through the nervous sweat and blood, looking into that horrid face with a disgust that welled up in his throat.

"You're a sick man, Ragnar," came Hervi's voice suddenly.

Ragnar turned from Hiccup, the whip in his hand curling sinuously around his arm. "And what does this insolence mean?" he spat at the old man.

Hiccup took the moment from the flogging to collect his nerves, to try and cope with the pain running, screaming through his body. Hervi had put Iggy behind him, his old wrinkled hands vaguely shielding the young boy's face and more importantly his eyes. Hiccup set his cheek on the sandy shore below him, tried exhaustedly to steady his breathing, the tide lapping softly under his arms. He could hear Iggy still yelping, asking why he couldn't do something, while Ragnar turned his attention to the old slave with a crack of arrogance in his voice. "What was that, Hervi?"

The old man gathered his voice, and Hiccup could read a strength in the words that followed, an unnatural strength, borne from the moment. "Hasn't he suffered enough?"

"The chief wants him to train dragons." Ragnar's lisp was casual, like he knew he had the advantage. And he was right. Don't risk yourself, Hervi_, Hiccup breathed. He needed that man to help Astrid, or at least tell her what was happening. He leaned up, bent his cold, wet back and tried to catch Hervi's eyes. Pain clawed up his tortured body, and he tensely, silently screamed, his jaw locked in an open contortion. "Don't- Hervi," he gasped, holding out his hand, his palm landing on the sand. The old man gave him a glance, pity and horror yelping through his old eyes and Hiccup begged him, don't, but the man had had enough and faced Ragnar and then the crowd. Something long hidden and subdued was pulsing through those old eyes and Hiccup sensed that it was hopeless, that there were going to be two dead

bodies on the shore today. He felt Hervi, saw him step closer to Ragnar's heavy build, away from Iggy, who took the brief moment to jump out of Hervi's grasp, run and skid to Hiccup's side, his knees almost automatically sliding onto the gravel. A childlike gasp popped out of his lips and he clapped a small hand to his mouth, staring at Hiccup, wide-eyed.

"Bad isn't it?" Hiccup smirked, his own voice thinner than he expected.

Iggy's face turned into a fierce pout, his eyes narrowing. "This is wrong," he spat and knelt up, looking behind him. Hiccup reached out and grabbed his arm. "Iggy, no," he whispered, holding him back, forcefully, his weak arm pulling Iggy's to the ground. Were they going to follow the wishes of a kid? Would they even listen to him? He would not have a child's blood on his hands. "Iggy, don't worry about me, okay?"

"But I gotta do something!" Iggy's little arm revolved in Hiccup's hold, trying to escape.

"You want to do something?" Hiccup swallowed, tense, feeling the speech that was revving in Hervi's voice, the whip that was tightening in Ragnar's hand. He pulled the small boy close to him, gasped quickly. "Go up to where you're staying and tell the girl there that everything's okay."

"But it's not."

"Just do it for me. Please, Iggy." The child opened his eyes wider, innocently, watching Hiccup. Hiccup licked his lips, his voice hoarse and pained. "Tell her Toothless is safe, that she got to get out of here. Tell her that-" He gasped a smile suddenly. "-that I wish we could have had those green-eyed kids." He squeezed Iggy's arm, realized how far away it was she posed the question to him, and how different he felt now. He looked earnestly into the young boy's eyes. "Would you do that for me, Iggy?"

Iggy bit his lip. "Gee." He rubbed his nose and looked at Hiccup, his small eyes heavy and his lips curving into displeasure. "Okay," he sighed.

Hiccup let the boy go, watched him scamper up away from him, passing Hervi whose voice was loud and clear now, strong and talking more to the slaves in the watching crowd than to Ragnar. Hiccup leaned back down on the rocks, the cool sea washing up on him, finding his blood and washing it gently around him, as he listened to the old man and realized he was talking about him, how he wasn't a traitor like Ragnar had made him out to be that day with the slaves.

It's no use, Hervi.

"Did you not hear what he said about dragons? He's doing this for that creature, as incredible as that sounds. I was with him, I know. He's not a traitor to his people."

Hiccup winced, leaned his head up and looked up into the sky that was turning black fast above him, the ash in the air that was coming down gently like a soft rain, the hum of dragons behind him, still hissing and growling at their masters, and the warriors, getting fewer on the

shore and thicker on the ships in the sea. He could hear the crack of thunder now, the closer hum of dragon's fire and catapults over the sea. And Ragnar's whip, lashing the earth, spitting rocks. His voice, "Enough, Hervi. Would you have me tell your master what you said now?"

"I think it's time I spoke the truth."

"You speak treason."

"Then so be it."

A great sorrow, mingled with a hope, hummed through Hiccup's heart. A few more words were exchanged, Ragnar telling Hervi to get Rune, that there would be consequences for what just took place, as he commanded the slaves around to scatter, scam. "There's nothing to see here." And then the boots came up step next to him, crunched over the rocks, the thin splash on the shallow water still lapping like a bitter comfort on his arms. He swallowed, felt his body tense, as the figure knelt down and spoke to him. It was Ragnar, those dirty black boots, with the patched leather on the toes, the ones he had memorized in the last fifteen minutes here on the ground.

"It's funny how gullible slaves are," Ragnar said, under his breath.

Hiccup didn't answer, kept his eyes on those boots, the water squeezing out from the soles. He didn't know what he meant, didn't have the strength to care, in too much burning pain to react.

Ragnar edged the hilt of his whip under Hiccup's chin suddenly, lifted the boy's head and Hiccup winced and faced him. Ragnar's eyes searched him, coolly, unattached. ". . . and how foolish some can be." He let go of Hiccup's head, stood up and wound the whip again. Hiccup felt the lash before it came, as it dug into his back, into the raw gashes already there. It was harsher this time, irritated, like swatting at an insect which would not be killed. Hiccup wanted to let out the yell fighting in his throat, but he kept it back, ground his teeth together, turned his head into the sand and let the desperate tears gush out from his eyes, those eyes stinging with the mingle of blood and sand and perspiration. The lashing grew faster and senseless, as Ragnar realized there was no winning in his game. Hiccup would not train dragons, he would not, and he would not beg for mercy. Hiccup felt himself grow weaker, his adrenaline reserves waning, his own strength consumed long ago. His body was alive with emotions of its own - his back terrified, his head white with fear and blinding pressure, his arms desperate to hide, as the leather snapped over his scalp, slit around the blades of his shoulder and the back of his waist. He felt like he was drowning, for in shock his chest had locked up on him and he struggled to gasp air through clasped lips buried in the sand. The world thundered in his heart, pounded like armies in his head. Ragnar did not ask Hiccup anymore if he would train dragons, only punished him for his answer. Hiccup could still faintly hear the voices of the enemy around, talking of the war, of the dragons that were useless now, of the casualties on both sides, someone telling Ragnar there was a war to fight, "leave the kid. The chief wants him executed anyway."

"I think he's just about dead," someone else said, without emotion.

Hiccup let his breath out, struggled to gain the next one, his body shaking. A chill swept through him, and a clutched, sharp pain stabbed his middle, paralyzing him. Ragnar had stopped, and Hiccup finally let out the moan that gasped desperately out of him. He turned his head to face away from Ragnar, faced the dragons that were still latched and chained, their wings lifting and flapping, angry at their capture. Hiccup let his eyes rest on those dragons, blink slowly and clear from the tears. He saw someone on the other side of the captured beasts, saw a dragon landing and a warrior stepping off from him. There was a hurry in the man's step and Hiccup wondered why he was even paying attention to him. He closed his eyes, breathed, then felt the steps of that man approach him, stop in front of him. He peered up one more time, looked at the figure. "I could have sworn valkyries were female," he choked, coughing on his own words. But the man - and he was sure it was a man now - didn't look at him, but spoke out with a harried, frantic urgency.

"Get the chief - the Hooligans have got the chief's daughter. Stoick is demanding a ransom. Daughter for son."

35. Chapter 30: The Other Side of Heroism

a/n: Pretty thrilled with this update. Lots more action and excitement. Hope y'all enjoy it!

>edit: Oh and to the reader Loonaticsllover13, just want to say thank you! for such an awesome and inspiring review. I can't respond to you since you're off of PM messaging, but yes, I draw most of the pictures, my sister did those not signed by me.

View the illustration at the official webpage. Put a period where the dashes are: howtotrainyourdragon2 - thecomicseries - com
>or at my deviantArt gallery: inhonoredglory - deviantart - gallery - 38855965<p>

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><p>How to Train Your Dragon II
>The Dragon Whisperer

Act III*
>**A Friendship Tested**

Chapter 30*
>**The Other Side of Heroism**

It was still in Astrid's mind - that expression on Hiccup's face, the confidence in it, when he told her, "trust me" and then was dragged out of the slave house, like a wild, unruly dog. She could still see the chain around his neck, too many dark bruises on his body, more than she figured the boy was aware of. It filled her with disgust, anger, but she listened, she wanted to trust Hiccup. When she had gotten word that he was alive, and they took her to the slave house, all she could think of was him, taking him in her arms. They said he was hurt, but how hurt, she had never imagined. And now, these long hours without him . . . Maybe he had a point, that they needed him to train dragons. But her heart was ripping, seething, red filling the vacancy he had left when they took him away.

She'd heard Fishlegs outside, that was a while ago now. The guard at the front kept him out of the house, did something to try to keep him from coming back. "Keep out of here, this is your chief's house."

"But I need to see someone in there!"

"_No one_ enters here. Get out of here, before I ask you _why_ you're so interested in the chief's slaves . . ."

But Astrid didn't believe it for a second that Fishlegs would just leave. She wanted to get out there and tell him something, managed to get outside and collect vegetables for the French woman, but Fishlegs was already gone. She debated striking off into the woods then and there, stood staring at the dark forest for longer than she should have. Noor called her back, reprimanding her, and she'd looked down on her bandaged hand again, remembered the paralyzed shock in Hiccup's face, the way he had begged her to stay safe. She couldn't do this to him. If she escaped and they found out, they'd punish him, just because they can. She _needed_ to know what was happening to him, before she did anything stupid - or heroic. As much as she hated to wait, for Hiccup's safety, for his life, she did. She needed information. So she'd asked Hervi to check on him, to find out where he was and what they were doing to him, because Hervi had more freedom in the town and they trusted him. But as each minute passed, her confidence in Hiccup's word ran low. Maybe they _weren't_ afraid to kill him, just because he had to train dragons. Maybe he'd try to be a hero again and get himself killed.

She sat at Noor's table, listened to the clack and clatter of her constant, pointless housekeeping. She watched the guard still staring at her, those eyes unafraid and his hands, stroking his unsheathed sword. It was still dark, damp in the house, despite the morning light. Noor wanted to keep her busy, kept asking her to do something, help her knead dough or slice roots. Maybe it was her way of keeping Astrid calm, or helping her pass the time. But to Astrid, it would only be betrayal to do anything but scheme ways to get out of here and protect Hiccup, find a way to free Toothless and the kids . . . "Why are you taking so long, Hervi?" she hissed, under her breath.

The back door opened suddenly, a cool morning wind blushing through her hair. She stroked it back, didn't look up at whoever it was who was entering. She could already feel that it was one of the slaves. There were two others besides Hervi and Noor, and neither of them she felt good vibes from. The one man, quiet and submissive, the other, rebellious and insulting, the one who said Hiccup could never be chief.

"So I heard him call you Astrid . . ."

She looked up, quickly, offended. It was Vott, his face dark, black oily hair slipping low over his eyes. She didn't like his tone. He slid down, sat on the bench opposite hers by the table. He leaned forward, leered at the guard and looked back to her. "Gotta keep still for that guy. He's sword-happy."

She said nothing, stared at him with a fathomless, wordless well of anger.

"Nah, I'm not scared of him, though."

She could read a lie the moment she heard one.

"Playing my game right, fast, not like said chief of the slaves here." He laughed, the volume of his voice only raising slightly above his whisper. She made no reaction, bent her head down, hair falling over her face to hide her eye. He stopped smiling, flashed his eyes at her, the glow in them softening, the smirk thick on his stubbled skin. "Hey, I'm trying to help you."

"_Help_ me?" The warrior in her burned through her hoarse, whispered voice. "You were the one who gave me this." She pushed out her injured hand, pulled it back and rose from the table.

He grabbed her arm, pressed it to the rough wooden surface of the table. "Don't run away. You can't anyway, of course . . ." He smirked.

She leaned her head to him, darkly. "Get away from me," she spat, her words slow, pointed, threatening.

"What, I'm not going to hurt you." He moved his hand up her arm, whispered, "I'm leading the slaves into rebellion, haven't you heard?" His voice was low, and he licked his lips, leering at her.

"Oh, and why should I care?" She pulled her arm, but his grip was strong.

"I think you're a great warrior. Why not stick around?" He nudged his head towards the back, and she looked up with her eyes, saw through the crack in the door that other slave, digging up the ground, a flash of metal in the dirt. She kept watching. A sword, wasn't it? Rusty, like it had been there too long, waiting . . . waiting for the right moment to be used. Her eyes went to Noor, who was also looking out the doorway, her lips clicking frustration as her hands flapped frustratingly on a small cloth, water spitting from her hands. "_J'en ai ras le bol_," she muttered.

She didn't look at Vott, brought her head lower to him, still staring outside, over his head. "I'm here for one thing," she hissed, "and your scheming isn't part of that."

The grip on her arm let up slightly, pressed in again. "You're still thinking about that boy, aren't you?"

She looked down to him, found his face creased with a hard impatience. "What's that supposed to mean?" she hissed.

His hold on her tightened and she pressed her teeth together. He stood, leaned to her, his face inches from hers, the hissing growl in his voice graveled, spitting. "You know what they're going to do to you, once they kill him? Make you a slave, like the rest of us." His stare broke into what could have been an earnest plea - or a clever imitation of one. She kept her stare in those dark eyes of his, the dim lighting carving thick shadows on his face, the air musty between them. "Forget about him, save yourself." His head nudged down and he watched her a moment, let his grip of her arm loosen. "You can be a hero, help free hundreds." The cunning smile returned to his lips. "I

can use you."

She slipped out of his grasp, something sharp lipping up her throat. "Sorry, but my loyalty isn't as shallow as yours." She stepped away from the table, leaned to him as she walked past. "May the people you free be more worthy than you of that liberty." She felt him stiffen, seethe, and a wash of warm satisfaction hummed through her. How could he even conceive of such an outrageous alliance. She looked out again, at the weapons Vott's partner was digging up from the earth. It was tempting to just . . . step out and take one. How her hands longed to wield an axe and use it. She looked back, the guard watching her. She almost wanted to see him figure out Vott's scheme, see what he would do with all his cunning wiles. But there was a shrill yell suddenly - from outside, like a child. She felt Vott react to it, step up. She stepped away, saw further out the doorway - saw a small kid, running past the other slave, his panting audible. She looked back, Vott glaring at her, saw the guard rise, but as Iggy came bursting through the back door, he relaxed, kept his eyes again on Astrid, slipping his sword back into the scabbard. Vott muttered something, turned away from the child, as if offended by his child's voice yelping into the air. "Astrid! Astrid-"

She looked down. Small hands wrapped around her legs suddenly, pulling at her, a desperate, foreign terror on the child's face. Pure fear, as his little hands clamored up her, reached for her arms, hands, anything he could grab onto. "Hush, shh, what's wrong?" she whispered, her tone forcefully neutral. Maybe it was just a lost plaything, or a snake bite. Children were rash and overreacted like that. The child pulled at her, trying to get her to a corner of the house, the corner where Hiccup had been chained. She resisted, felt in her heart that somehow this news was about him. "What is it Iggy?" she whispered, trying to grab the boy's face, calm down, his cheeks flared and hot, his head bobbing in unconscious panic. "What is it!" she persisted. Iggy stopped struggling, blinked his wide blue eyes, inhaled, breathed deeply. He licked his chapped lips, braced his little frame. "Hiccup told me . . . to tell you everything's okay. And- and- and Toothless is safe, and-"

Astrid swallowed, her throat tight. Children don't lie.

The kid brought his hand up, rubbed his nose. "He wants you to leave," he choked, sniffing. He shook his head, clearly begging her, without word - no, no. She brought her hands over the child, held him close to her, the shivering fear in him. "He said leave . . ." he whispered. That was the clincher. That's all Hiccup wanted out of this message for her. Maybe he did get Toothless safe, but why not say he got away with him, if everything truly was all right . . .? No, Hiccup was lying, and when Hiccup lied, it meant he had run out of options, he was throwing up the final flag.

The fire welled up to her face, made her voice almost angry, her hand raised to emphasize- "It's never too late" before she realized this wasn't Hiccup she was speaking to. That day on the docks, when he was rejected and she'd seen him more hurt than any time else in his life. When he'd avoided her, until she found him looking out on the shore, maybe for hours, looking into the nothingness of the ocean void of ships. What thoughts went through his head she could only guess, but when he spoke, it was raw, it was failure, it was hopelessness. She made a decision that day to get to the bottom of what made him do the things he had done, why they were so important, even as she had

basically guessed the answer herself. He needed her, to force the truth out of him, give him hope. That's what she was to him, that's what she wanted to be for him. He needed hope today, and she would give it to him, if what she did would kill her, if what she did would do nothing but make him die knowing that none of his friends had abandoned him.

"Is that all he said?" she whispered, her emotions a storm within her, controlled on the outside, the child small and frightened in her arms. "No," the boy breathed, and she could feel him shake his head, a tiny motion before he looked up to her, his eyes so wide and sad, so pure in a child's simple sorrow. "He said something about green-eyed kids, wishing to have them." He sniffed. "It sounded bad." He swallowed and pushed his head into her waist. Astrid let her lips fall open, her mind back to a day so far away from now. A cold fear ripped through her, a fear and the anger that comes when you didn't want to give up. "Iggy," she whispered, holding his head close, bringing his ear close to her lips. "Iggy, I want you to tell me the truth."

"But-" His small hands on her arms.

"Listen to me, Iggy. This is important." She held the back of the boy's head, leaned down to him. Why did he have to say things were okay? Why did he try to save her? Free her from feeling responsible for him. So she wouldn't come and save him, trying to protect her . . . again. But Hiccup would do a thing like this, talk about water when the world was on fire, give someone his ship when he was sinking. It was the kind of thing she admired in him, that helpless heroism which made him do stupid, hopeless things. But that was the thing about a leader, about the person she wanted Hiccup to be, and those were the choices kings and heroes had to make.

But she was no king nor hero and she would not give up on Hiccup, just because he had given up on himself. That was the other side of heroism, to give it back when it is given. Only one question stood in her way. She swallowed, held Iggy close, her lips touching his little ear. "Iggy, just answer me this. Is . . . is Hiccup dead already?"

The boy stopped shivering, settled into a calm that suddenly was frightening. He looked up, his eyes wide, staring at her. "I don't think he'd want me to say." Iggy's voice was breathless, mature, calm for his small years.

Astrid held him, her hands on his shoulders. She didn't have time to play games, _especially_ Hiccup's. "I know he doesn't _want_ me to save him. I know he wants to help me get away." Her whisper was hoarse. "But I can't leave him. You understand that? Even if he's dying right now, I can't do what he's asking me to."

Iggy bobbed his head once. "Gee . . ." He gulped.

"Just tell me, is he gone already?"

Iggy breathed in, held the breath a moment. "No, not yet . . ."

"Okay," Astrid breathed, letting the boy go, preparing herself. She would get to him, and she would not be too late. "And where is he?"

Her voice was firm, controlled.

"On the beach, next to the boats."

She stepped back, looked to the guard, to Noor. Vott wasn't in the room anymore, but the sound of his cohort outside, digging up the metal, the sound of dirt flying from his shovel. She had no fear now, of what they'd do if she fought back. Apparently Hiccup had decided the worst had happened to him already. She whispered once more to Iggy, told him to stay safe, and out of the way. Then she stepped outside, without permission, felt the guard stand up from his seat, step towards her. She looked at the slave digging up the ground, carefully hiding the weapons under the dirt of his excavation. She bent down, found a metal hilt that looked capable, slid out the spear it belonged to.

"Halt."

She grasped the spear with her bandaged hand, felt the blood rush to her forehead. "Not this time."

With a swift slicing motion the spear twisted forward in her hand. She preferred an axe, but she didn't have time to be choosy. She whirled, found the guard's weapon unsheathed and ready, his step fast towards her. She covered the distance between them, intent on meeting his aim with one of her own. He swung his sword, she met its metal with a clash of her spear, sliding sideways, towards the frame of the house. She thrust her weapon ahead of her, ducked to the side of the door as his blade swung towards her, missed, and chopped into the wood. The metal caught a panel of her skirt and pinned it to the wall. She swiveled, trying to turn, her trapped skirt keeping her stuck facing the wall. His large hand grabbed her right wrist and he yanked his other arm up, lifting the sword from the wood, the pressure off her skirt. She lashed and the blade flew up, towards her throat. She threw her head back, the thrust flashing above her eyes and her wrist twisting savagely in search of release. How was she supposed to use this spear if he paralyzed her hand like that? So much for a fair fight.

Her body lost balance. She grunted as her back smashed into the dirt, her shoulder blades reeling with the collision of armor against packed earth. The guard fell on top of her, apparently not part of his plan of attack. It was difficult to swordfight with your enemy inches away from your face. Astrid spat into the man's eyes and his head recoiled. Her right hand still was useless in his crushing grip, her weapon stupidly lying by her side as her body kicked underneath her opponent. Her knee found his ribcage, he yelped as she shouted through gritted teeth. "That's for Hiccup." Another kick, this time the stomach. "For the Hooligans."

Suddenly his thick hand crashed into her face and pushed into her eyes, the fingers grappling her cheek sideways into the dirt. She gasped and her lips smeared open against the damp palm. His knee hit her thigh and pushed her legs flat. She cursed, suddenly became aware of Noor somewhere over them, slapping the man with a broom and yelling in irritated foreign syllables. Astrid rolled her eyes. She should've picked a kitchen knife. And then there was Iggy's small voice, too close to the warfare, yet yelping in excitement, shouting for Astrid to get up and "Get him! He's gonna get you!"

Noor gave the man another whack, a hard slap which made the guard snap, turn up and grab the bottom of Noor's makeshift weapon. He yanked, slipped it from her grasp, shoved it up and made its end jerk into her face. Noor slipped, squealing, an offended yelp on her lips. He turned to Astrid and she winced, found the sword's edge at her neck, lashing hard against her skin. His eyes were hard and calculating, unfeeling as he stared at her, his hand ready to swipe the blade. She thought fast, her one arm still free from his killer grip. If she could find his dagger, the sax every Viking carried in his belt- She found the small hilt in his belt, and in one fast motion, jabbed it into him, anywhere, his grin contorting into a scream, as the man's body jumped above her and Iggy yelped. The sword kicked into her jawbone, but she stifled the panic, knew it was just a reflex.

She heaved the man off her body, unlatched his grip around her wrist as he lay twisted on his side, his eyes and face a sucking plastered white. He grappled feebly, but she had already secured his sword for herself. She took a breath and shoved a finger across her wet stringy bangs. He wasn't dead - yet, but he would talk when and if one of his comrades came by. She looked to Noor and the child, who stared at his kicking, sprawled figure with a shock and a curious solemnity. She heard a lisp behind her, whirled around and saw Vott's partner still unearthing weapons, as if nothing had happened, and then Vott himself, looking her over with a smirk in his eye and a slightly rusty sword in his hand. "So it's begun . . ." he hummed. She inhaled, turned away, felt the chaos that was going to happen, if the slaves in the island revolted, in the middle of a war. She stepped quickly to Noor and Iggy, whispered, "You can't stay here."

Iggy looked up at her, tugged on Noor's apron as he pointed towards the shore. "Let's find Hiccup," he whispered, and Astrid pressed her lips together, put her hand on the boy's shoulder. "We will," she said, firmly, more to herself than to the boy. The French woman seemed to catch the drift, held up her hand a moment and dashed back in the house, emerged with a small basket. "Emergency," she spat, in her thick accent, as the warm, fresh scent of bread wafted up from the basket. Astrid nodded, threw her hand back for them to follow.

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The tide carried him swiftly, his heart driven with the one goal: to get to Hiccup. Once Toothless had made the decision to go, to disobey the one he loved most and take matters into his own power, the single-mindedness of protection that was so keen in creatures kicked in, that fierce will to defend. His senses were sharp, his mind alive with panic, fire, anger. There were dragons on the shore, chained Nightmares and Timberjacks . . . some of them he recognized as cohorts of that devil Skari. The sand was warm and smooth under his feet, as he spat it away in a half-flying, half-running haste. The vision of Hiccup on his knees, comforting him, talking to him, that voice which begged him. . . .

Toothless let his wings out, his feet pounding forward. There were human screams on either side of him, women and men, children and shouts of fear, playing morning light off the grassy structures of their human homes, as he raced through the human settlement, a desperate wail in his throat, mingled with a fierce and tireless growl that stretched the wicked leather strap on his snout and the

tight bound of Hiccup's own saddle on his back, strained with the anger of his jaws yearning to break free, the anger of his pounding rushed feet to reach that hillside, that pen where he'd seen him last, his anger stronger than his wildness, maybe so strong now because he had to make it, he had to be right, it was a choice of no return.

He growled, roared in his throat, his wings slapping down barrels, lifting him up into the air a few moments before lack of flight brought him down again. Dust and dirt, mud and grass kicked up around him, as he fled down the pathways of the town, the apparent labyrinths scheming against his haste. The leather bridle around his snout had at long last ripped, the corner near his seething mouth charred and wrinkled, threading with the passion of his will. He lashed his head around, his jaws working upward, a slap of mud on some corner of standing water in his path, the yell of a woman, a flying lash of light from a thrown javelin his way, slap, splash of water, up the path bordered by houses, broken barrels and pieces of wood, a pile of firewood he leapt over, and up the hill, his wings carrying him up, doubled, oh how much he wanted to fly, needed to. His jaws opened in a growl, a glowing blue hiss as gas and ignition mingled in his throat. There, the pen, so close now, the moist ground under his feet, the mossy grass, his claws jabbing into the earth, one more leap, a flap of his tail, his impassioned wings. The dragons in the old pen hissed, yelled at his sudden, violent return. Skari stared at him, lashing his legs down, firm and his black wings vibrating with a hatred that never changed. Toothless ignored him, looked around the pen. But it was just mud, patches of dirt and grass, the broken old tree holding the chains to those dragons, the bars of fenceposts, and the footsteps, the depressions in the ground. He leapt on them, sniffed them. He could hear Skari taunting him in the background, saying the rebellion had already begun, that the human scum was going to be swept away, that it was his own boy who brought these creatures into such deceptive contact with so many of your vile human followers, he hissed.

Toothless growled, let his lungs fill up with the bloody, faint scent of Hiccup on the ground here, trailing away from the pen. I'm done with you, Skari. He leaned back, looked into the sharp yellow eyes of that Skrill. Maybe Hiccup was right, that feuds like this came to nothing, came to only him nearly losing the thing which meant most to him - and keeping that thing meant more than the pain of losing his father and his family, and the vengeance, even the justice, which violence would entail. He had Hiccup, and the madness in this shared hatred had driven both him and Skari to such ends that one had lost his freedom, and the other, his best friend. Dagr let out a growl, welled up the fire in his throat, raised his wings and shot high into the trees, the bare naked branches of the tree, let the pieces of his anger fall like leaves onto the torched, brown earth, the blue viscous flames bursting to orange, taking flight in the branches, licking down to the fenceposts and the dragons below. Skari turned his eyes away, struggled in the chains that lashed him to the burning tree. Toothless narrowed his eyes, shook his head. It wouldn't kill him, just a little fire. . .

He turned from the Skrill, back to the scratched depression in the ground where Hiccup's metal leg had dragged across. He could hear the dragons seething behind him, vowing vengeance. But his mission here wasn't with them. Dragons ahead of him were writhing in their cages, their eyes alive with the passion to consume, burn, and kill. The

rebellion in their hearts coming to the fore as teeth met metal bars, as chains and leather straps met once and again a hunger for violence, for freedom. It would not be long before chaos came, destruction and fire, when these dragons got out, either by the force of their will or the betrayal of their riders . . . Toothless could feel it, as he tracked that single precious scent of the one sanity in this madness.

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Maybe there was such a thing as Fate. Such a thing which laughed at him, taunted him, played with his mind and teased him with peace.

Rune clenched his fist, felt the waves of hatred pulse through his body, that same hatred which he felt so many years ago now, when his brother first lied and pretended he had never deceived him for Valla's hand, when his brother cast him out of the tribe and left him to mourn his loss of Valla in the wild winds of the sea, alone, schemes of pain and anger seething in his mind. Stoick may have had his daughter, and he did . . . Heather. He could see her now, when he told her the boy had changed her. She didn't deny it, she didn't say she was wrong. How could he change her? Why? And the dragon - how did she think she could trust it? Dragons were as wild as the wind, as the tempest, and maybe it was a dark force Hiccup used to quell their fiery spirits. He should have stopped her from riding that beast, and maybe she'd still be here to finish the job they had come here for.

He looked out at the growing storm, the flashes of lightning coming closer, the boom of thunder punctuating the wash of air and ash in his face. Ragnar had nearly killed the boy, they told him, and he wished he had. It didn't matter if he went by sword, axe, or by whip, he wanted the boy gone, done, and he wouldn't survive thinking he was still breathing.

And Heather . . . Was it even true what his brother said? Rune closed his eyes, whispered his daughter's name, remembered her dark hair, the white cape behind her, the way she held him and promised him that one day he will be free, that his heart would no more plague him with sorrow. Stoick had cheated once on him and he wouldn't be afraid to do it again.

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Hiccup breathed slowly, carefully. He felt so small, so frail here on the cool sand of the beach, shaking nervously, like the wet, whispering shiver of a spider's web in a storm. He was still laid out on the shore, face down, the voices rising around him. His body was fighting, to regain its sense of sanity, to stay alive, the pain, almost too much for his small frame to take. Hiccup let out a shaking moan, felt the relief in it, gritted his teeth and hissed a yell that crumbled into a gasping, wet wail. The voices grew loud and panicking, and in his struggling mind, only pieces came through: daughter for son, his father's name, his own name, Heather's, the war, what to do, what would the chief do? Do about what? That haggard voice, a crunch on the sand, someone prodding him, a thick, hot hand, gripping his arm, raising it, trying to lift him up. He yelled, resisting fiercely, the broken skin of his back moist and hot, like unforged metal, glowing and piercing, pressing into his body, his

nerves begging him to squelch the flames, put it out, do something. But the force would not stop and he resigned to it, pressed his jaws together and sucked in air, grappling with his hands on the arm lifting him. His fingers clawed the warrior, meeting the metal arm guard, the itchy wool, the clean, healthy skin.

Hiccup felt himself raised to his feet, supported by someone who gingerly removed the loose rope on his hands, the fraying ends that were useless now. His legs didn't hold, wavered like wet leather under him, his stub of a leg wrenched and bleeding. He feared the metal might come loose, instinctively put more pressure on the slipping strength of his right leg. His eyes had squeezed shut in the strain, and he concentrated on breathing, as a familiar voice pushed clear into his head. He exhaled tensely. He didn't need to see that man now, he didn't want to. Rune. Was this the end now, couldn't he have died before? Without seeing the pleasure of this brother of his father's? Hiccup breathed, exhaled through an open mouth, felt sticky liquid spill out from his lips, curve around his jawline. That person holding him firmed his grip, but it was gentle, as if there was a heart behind it. As if he knew how horrible the state of the boy in his grasp. Hiccup leaned his head up, looked at Rune, his eyesight muddled, like an underwater scene. He forced out the tears, blinked, saw that face, the one which looked far too much like his Dad's. He winced, the left side of his teeth cracking, air hissing into his lungs. Rune looked at him, his eyes hard and muddled with what looked like sadness red with hate, a depth of anger. Hiccup exhaled, tensely, shivering, breathing, watching those eyes.

"Let him go," Rune suddenly said, his voice edged and dark, to the man behind Hiccup, keeping the stare between them. Hiccup felt the grip on him ease. He parted his lips, sucked in air thicker, bracing himself. The man let Hiccup go and he wavered in the vacancy, his left leg firming, blood slipping down the stump of his leg and down to where he couldn't feel anymore. He kept still, his balance frail, his arms hanging down, weak and useless to him. Hiccup clenched his teeth, stared at Rune who stood alone with him on the shore. He tried to speak, but only a hissed whisper came out. "What is . . . what do you want with me?" He swallowed, looked up at Rune, forced stability into his frame.

The warrior left them, and Rune came closer, his eyes flashing, as if thoughts were sparking vibrant and alive behind his mind, still in his thoughts, shivering on his lips, the way anger does before it shouts into the open. "You knew all along, didn't you?"

Hiccup shook his head, a spasm more than anything. "What . . . ?"

Rune pounded his feet into the sand, got too close to Hiccup. The boy leaned back, caught himself with his left foot, the metal sinking into the sand, squishing into the wetness. He winced, his eyes flickering.

Rune breathed a hot breath into Hiccup's face. "You let your dragon trap her, you made it send her there."

The words fought for understanding in Hiccup's distracted mind, fought through the fire, the thin strips of pain raging in his back. "Toothless?" Hiccup breathed, the pieces, what this man was saying coming together. Stoick is demanding a ransom . . . Sparks of

consciousness flashed into his mind. He blinked and suddenly -
daughter for son. His chest spasmed, made him gasp, the realization
of what his Dad was trying to do. And Toothless- The idea formed,
like passing patches of light in a forest. Hope, some unreal
sensation glowed in his mind, that _maybe_ . . . maybe he'd come out
of this alive.

"My daughter-" Rune's voice was suddenly hard, shaking, taking
Hiccup's attention. He looked at Rune again, that voice shivering
with a fragility even Hiccup in his weakened state could feel. "Don't
act like you don't know . . . that your scum of a father has
her."

Acid shoved up Hiccup's throat, his body tensed in one great washing
pulse, alertness breathing through him. "Don't dare- don't you dare
speak of my Dad . . . like that," he spat, his voice cracked.

"I speak of him _as he is,_" Rune shouted, glared at him, his chest
heaving, emotion throbbing through his expression, a deep desperate
emotion Hiccup could tell - that fear, or was it love? It looked so
familiar, _felt_ so familiar. Hiccup swallowed, parted his lips,
licked the spill of blood that met the edge of his mouth.

"What shall we tell Stoick?" someone asked suddenly, a quiet
frightened voice from behind Rune.

But the Skirra VÃ©llite chief didn't turn back, only clenched his
fist, his eyes still on Hiccup, those sorrowful eyes . . . his
shoulders weakening, a defeat, a resignation? Hiccup was confused.
"Tell him I-" Rune said, his voice bitter. "I think he's lying. She's
already killed . . . and tell him, so is his son."

Hiccup shook his head. "No . . ." Rune waved his hand, indicatively,
and a young warrior stepped forward, a clean axe in his hand, one
that clearly had seen no bloodshed. Hiccup lashed his head down,
frustrated, tired, drained of energy he did not have. The warrior
stood above him and Hiccup felt the chain removed from around his
neck, the cold metal clashing sharp against itself on the ground. The
cutting wash of pain in his back ebbed, burned him with an amateur's
fire for a moment, not the hot and learned hearth of an old
blacksmith. Hiccup drunk in air, souping into his lungs like grimy
water. There was a sound suddenly, far away in the depth of his mind,
from somewhere real, real but . . . coming closer. Hiccup opened his
eyes, looked into the town, into the gray musty green patches of
grass, houses, the warriors that weren't looking his way, but now
yelling, drawing their weapons, and the young warrior, turning from
him - a growl, a clatter of wood and metal, the hiss and roar of some
great, ferocious animal, a predatory hiss, loud and hungry for
something, from the shadows behind the town and the dark gray air.
Instinct made Hiccup step back, stumble, the imbalance of his
weakness tripping him, and he caught the ground weakly, the warm sand
finding the lash breaking through the back of his hands, yellow
specks on streaks of red. He winced, heard - arrows slicing off from
bows, warning shouts, "_Dragon!_" - then he turned back, saw, a black
shape, wings, blue fire and suddenly orange in the town, catching
fire on sod and fenceposts, flames that made his heart race, panic,
as he clawed the sand but realized- "_Toothless?_" he gasped.
"Toothless!" The yell in his throat surprised him. He clamored to his
feet, felt Rune next to him, stumbled, fell again and got more sand
on him, but Toothless was there, he could see the dragon's fierce

body, those dark, dangerous eyes flashing, hissing at the warriors around him, fear and shouts of defiance in their voices, the instinct to shoot and defend. Hiccup felt life pulsing into him, life and a terror - that Toothless was here, that Toothless was here and he wasn't safe. "Toothless-" he shouted, his eyes latching to the warriors around, weapons drawn. Old memories hit him, the Kill Ring, and Toothless, who was still alive only because his father still loved his son and held back from ending the dragon's life then and there.

But here, there was no chance for bargaining, a day of do or die, he'd thought before, and why did Toothless come back? No, he wasn't supposed to. Hiccup clawed the sand, struggling to reach the dragon - he desperately wanted to get to him, a visceral desire that burned in his core. Strength yelled through him, and he put his leg out, lifted himself and forced himself forward.

Blue fire lit up the scene before him, rolled on the sand like balls of viscous liquid. Hiccup shielded his eyes, yelled as the fire rolled past him, made someone behind him shout with a shaking, horrific terror Hiccup had only heard from people who- he turned back. The man was on fire, his clothing alive with flames, licking orange and yellow and red. Hiccup bent shocked a minute, his own pain suddenly muted. He could never get used to watching a human being die.

"Get the dragon!" someone yelled, Rune's voice. Hiccup whirled.

"It's come back for the boy, the creature knows."

The sound of arrows drawn.

"NO!" Hiccup screamed, jumped up and ran, pain streaking down his legs. He could see Toothless, still too far from him, fighting with his wings, his tail, looking at him, those eyes mixed between yelps for him and anger for those people trying to harm him. Sand was kicking up around Toothless, a dozen and more men aiming for him, the young ones daring and boisterous to kill the dragon, the older men hanging back, shields and swords and crouched low. Someone tried to grab Hiccup as he skidded through the sand, Hiccup slapped the arm away, then- snap. Hiccup heard the sound of Toothless yelping, saw him buckle, his back concaved, wings shooting out with a stiff suddenness. A high-pitched gasp of injury. The wail stabbed Hiccup, and he spun his foot forward, fear shooting through his nerves. Snap. Another arrow dug into the dragon's neck, behind the leather harness. Hiccup shouted, jumped the last distance between them, fell in front of the dragon, a gasp on his lips, sand and rocks flying into his face. Why? Toothless lashed, his writhing body like a snake in front of him, the tail whacking and the wings a mess of joints and membrane. Hiccup crouched low, muffled the shock of Toothless' prosthetic hitting him in the randomness of the dragon's convulsion. "Toothless, it's all right," he desperately gasped, putting his hands out, not knowing what to grab or how to comfort him. Toothless got upright, growled, shouted and let out a seething passion of blue and white fire, edged with purple. Hiccup ducked, gritted his teeth, looked back and saw the arrows still coming, the spear that just missed the dragon's head. "Buddy, you gotta get out of here-" he yelled, above the shout of men and Toothless' incessant and offended hiss. "Toothless- why-"

Toothless looked at him, those narrow eyes melding to roundness, the docility, the tenderness and care that bonded them. Hiccup lisped in a breath, the pain in his body thrashing back. "Why did you have to come back?" he breathed, something stabbing his heart. And Toothless, looking at him, a hum in his throat, a warm tender hum. Hiccup hissed in a breath, through the burning raw agony, felt the dragon, felt in his heart, hurt, love - he knew now that in asking Toothless to leave him, he had asked something the dragon could never give.

Toothless' eyes squeezed into a convulsion, his frame slinked down. Hiccup put his hand on the dragon's back splattered with red, pressed in and tried to comfort him, tell him sorry. He knelt up, looked back and saw the arrows aimed, flying, snapping into Toothless' hide, the dragon snapping back, shoving his body into Hiccup, shielding him, forcing him back. Hiccup pulled himself up, held onto the metal rings of his saddle, leaned over and grabbed hold of an arrow in the dragon's neck, pulled, pulled, the effort deafening in the tendons between his arm and back. Toothless pulled away, the arrow snapped off, and Hiccup gasped, hissed a yell for the strain in his shoulders. More shouts of men behind him, then Toothless' contorted body swooping around him, circling him, the tail slapping into his face, fire flying out of the dragon's mouth, boom, blast, fire - blinding, hot, angry, fast. Hiccup pulled his arm up, his body draped over the dragon, the open cuts in his back furrowed, hot, grabbed another arrow in Toothless' hide, his fingertips red with his dragon's blood, his hands shaking as he gripped the thin wood, stress on his arm, pressing down and pulling up. The arrow came out, and he felt Toothless hiss, jerk in a spasm. The dragon looked at him, fire in his own eyes. He growled, nudged his nose into Hiccup's body, quickly, harshly, a statement of purpose. Hiccup had seen that look before, that purpose in Toothless' motion. He braced himself, slipped upward, took a breath and threw his arms over the dragon, hissed through his locked teeth and held desperately onto the handles of his old saddle, slipped his good foot into the right pedal, and his left . . . Hiccup looked down, at the pedal that was not his own, but the replaced one which wouldn't take his prosthetic. He cursed, looked up again at the arrows aimed at them. "Go - NOW!" he shouted, wrapping his arms around the dragon, pulling his left arm down to the replaced stirrup, shoving it up by hand with a thick violence. Toothless hissed, opened his wings and leapt off the ground. Hiccup felt the dragon lift up, flap his wings and shriek as another arrow lodged into his scales. Hiccup kept down, knew he wouldn't be able to hold on much longer, his back bent and his fingers frail and shaking as he turned the pedal with one hand, gripped the saddle with the other. He looked back, below him, the warriors still aiming, and Rune's face, a defiant anger, a wrath so deep and hateful Hiccup turned away and let the pain wash over him, the feeling that the air was sinking under them, Toothless yelping as the tail failed. Hiccup squeezed his eyes shut, yelled as he lifted the pedal again, his hand flashing with sparks of nerves. He could hear the men coming after them, the voices loud and commanding, and the fire in the town, warm on his skin, the smoke thick in his lungs. He let the pedal go, his arm tearing with agony, Toothless yelped, hummed. He grabbed the pedal again, tried to lift it, couldn't, felt his body slipping from the saddle. The dragon banked erratically, Hiccup grabbed the saddle handles desperately, with both hands, his right foot caught in the other pedal. He could feel that they were going out of control, looked out and saw the flames of the burning town bursting all around them. He felt the fire

on his legs, sparks jumping across Toothless, people screaming, running out of houses and into the streets. And then dragons' wings, a breath of air above him, and he looked up, saw creatures flying, fleeing out of cages and bursting from behind houses, chains still on their necks and jaws, the burned remains of wooden poles hanging from the end of the lashing leashes of metal. Hiccup ducked, and Toothless skidded to the ground, the tail a useless appendage. Hiccup slipped off, back to the warm earth, his right foot still caught in the stirrup. There was a yell, a dragons' scream that wailed deep and long into his ears. He looked out, for the warriors but all he could see was fire, flames of a horrible inferno, as an inferno it had become, hundreds of untrained, caged creatures setting themselves free, rising into the air like a million dead birds come to life from the smoke and ash of the sky and the flames. It was an unreal vision, looking through the smoke and ash, the silhouettes flying up in the glowing orange.

Hiccup swallowed, his mouth dry, as Toothless nudged him again, points of arrows coming out of him, the dragon's snout shoving fast into his chest and face. Hiccup heard the sound of running up behind him, men he prayed were not their pursuers, as he forced himself up, put his arms around Toothless' head. He felt so weak, his strength fighting to come out, failing. But he could do this, please - he gasped, couldn't let Toothless down now, couldn't have let him come back for nothing. He gripped the saddle bars behind on Toothless' neck, forced himself up, as he heard the warriors' voices coming louder, looked and saw their shapes through the fire. "Just run," he breathed, unable to work the pedal right now. Toothless yelped, set off through the flames, Hiccup holding tight and desperately to the handles, praying they could make it, that the seed of hope which had died in him could be revived.

36. Chapter 31: Blood on My Hands

a/n: Hello again, dear reader. I have to admit I feel a lot like Stoick right now, "finally I can show my face in public again!" It's been far too long since the last update on this story and some of you may have been wondering what became of it. Most of the writing of this last chapter took place five months ago, and in that time before our planned post date I really pressed myself an edge too far. My body needed relief from the stress I put on myself because of this story, and the fandom associated with it. I snapped and just needed an escape. So I basically disappeared from the Internet for the most part, and only now have I gotten up the strength to tackle this again, because like I said in the beginning I want to see this story to the end, with the most capable hands I can give it, for the most quality tale I can tell. I'm shooting to finish this story before the sequel comes out. *crossing fingers*

View the illustration at the official webpage. Put a period where the dashes are: howtotrainyourdragon2 - thecomicseries - com
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gallery / 38855965

* * *

><p>How to Train Your Dragon II
****The Dragon
Whisperer**

****Act III**

>A Friendship Tested****

****Chapter 31**

>Blood on My Hands****

A song of fire and voices, shouts and screaming in the mad inferno of the town, some thick and loud, men who found death threatening to lick the life from them, others wailing and long. Maybe it was dragons and maybe it was women, frightened panicked women, and then the piercing scream, the one that slit thin and painful into Hiccup's head, the shrill cries of dragons he'd never heard before. Or maybe it was the call of dragons in a situation he'd never faced before, a mass hatred he could feel in his bones, a unity in their anger. In his burning mind it made no sense, only a screaming cacophony of flames and confusion.

The village of Herkja was burning. Warriors once fearless and confident began to realize the fierce will in the dragons they called weapons for a day. Rune stayed on the shore, still shocked, weakened by the wracking of his body, angered by the belief that his brother had killed his little girl, and yet that maybe she was right and this curse on him would never die. Astrid was still making her way down to the town, having told the slave and Iggy to run to the woods, her mind only on Hiccup, praying against hope that he was alive, preparing her heart if he wasn't. Fishlegs was disheartened, but when the dragon rebellion began, he made his way back into the town and the cages, suddenly called by the notion a dragon he knew was amongst the vicious crowd. The twins and Snotlout, only hearing the sounds of war and seeing nothing. And Stoick, watching a small, unstable dragon fight his way through the battle to give him a message, the one he hoped would read that this Heather would be exchanged for his son.

Hiccup held onto Toothless with more desperation than he'd ever held on with before. He knew his body was a dead weight, that he needed rest and healing, if he ever hoped to recover. Life was still a question, but one he fought to keep, for Toothless' sake. The ash and heat in the air made his eyes water with irritation and he closed them, let cleansing tears stream down his cheeks. Toothless' thick muscle heaved hard beneath him, a rhythm that was hypnotic and comforting. He heard the yells of war and bloodshed around him, a haunting sound mingled with the fleeing, attacking dragons' wings, the varied pitch of the many wails washing the air with a noise that made the world seem inhuman and foreign.

He couldn't get far, as he guessed he wouldn't. His balance slipped - in the burning instability of Toothless' running, itself jarred by spasms from the arrow wounds the dragon had sustained. And the fire, the yelling, the confusion, at one point Toothless turned, to make a corner and Hiccup slid, grabbed the saddle, but couldn't grip it, felt himself hit the earth again, his body desperate for rest. Toothless' snout nudged into his chest, and his face, and he could feel the rush and panic in the motion, the growl in Toothless' throat, a pleading for Hiccup to get up, *i_get/i up_*, and get into the saddle. He felt the fire's heat, flush against his cheek, breathing down his body, and he looked up, saw the structure next to him in flames, not more than a man's length away, the dark black tables and chairs inside exposed and alive, deteriorating in fire. Hiccup raised his arm from off the hot ground, felt the warm scales

of his dragon, tried to revive the strength in him. "Buddy, you should've left me," he said, half-chuckling, the end of his phrase buckling as a clutch of pain jumped up his scarred back.

Toothless snorted, jerked his head to the side, his eyes narrowing and his snout shoving faster along Hiccup's side, persistent and undaunted. "Okay, okay-" Hiccup gasped. "That i_hurts/i_." He turned over, shoved his knee up along the ground to regain his balance. He heard voices on the other side of the corner, thick footfalls even in the midst of the flames and the hot searing sound of fire around them. The shadow of a cottage kept him shielded from the humans making their way to him, but the cover wouldn't last long. He knew in his gut they were after him, from the sound of surety in their step, they weren't fleeing the flames, not yet. Toothless jawed his middle, a gummy hold, tried to lift him off the ground. Hiccup winced, pushed his foot up and sucked in a yell as Toothless' healing yet wet saliva met his fresh wounds. He got a grip on the ground and Toothless released him, as Hiccup pressed his palm into the dragon's forehead, for support, and looked ahead of him and suddenly- a scream, a voice, ahead of him.

Hiccup jerked his head up, knew the sound of that. What was she doing here?

"Hiccup, watch out!"

He ducked, instinctively, felt the swoosh of a spear above him, Toothless screaming in alarm. There was a warrior's yell, from Astrid's own suddenly louder voice, hotter, angry with a passion he'd never heard from her. She somersaulted past him, the fire in her voice and the clash, hiss, i_clap/i_ of metal on metal blade. There was a shout to his right, someone coming close, and he looked, saw for a fleeting instant the silhouette against the orange. He felt Toothless hiss, gather the gas in his throat, but Hiccup yelled, "i_No/i_-", an instinct's reaction, because he didn't want to see, not by Toothless, not again. There had been enough fire, enough blood, today. The delay made Toothless spin around to question him, the man to catch up, and Hiccup knew in an instant the danger of the choice he'd made. He grabbed an arrow buried in Toothless' hide, his teeth clenching as he pulled and the weapon sucked out of the dragon's skin, Toothless yelping, an instant before thick arms grabbed him, and he felt his body thrown to the ground, the man above him shoving his knee into Hiccup's abdomen. Hiccup yelled, grunted, the arrow in his hand shaking. The sword in that man's hand suddenly rose, a silhouette against the flames and gray sky above. Fear shot up Hiccup's heart. i_No/i_, he couldn't die now. Toothless yelped, Astrid's scream in the air, like a dagger in his heart. It rang in his head, a responsibility he owed them, to survive. He wouldn't die like this, not here, not i_pointlessly/i_. Hiccup pressed his teeth together, whirled, as best he could, pinned like this. The sword came down, just missed him, and Hiccup turned, grappled for the earth ahead of him. The man hissed, lifted the weapon again, Hiccup yelled, kicked up behind him, the man jolting, his face morphing into irritation. He stared down at Hiccup, for a breathless instant, and Hiccup squirmed, tried to get his body free from the man's pressing knee.

"Not this time," the man grated, lunging a hand around Hiccup's throat. The boy gasped, felt the air escape him, his body lifting. Hiccup flung his hands around the big hand holding him up. He

remembered the arrow in his hand, felt delirium pushing into his mind, as the hand squeezed, thickly, swiftly, without remorse or hesitancy. His vision blurred, air impassable through his throat. Gasp. The arrow, death, he couldn't let this happen. i_Arghh/i_. Hiccup shoved the arrow forward, putting all his power into the blow, barely hoping for a good shot, wanting only air, i_air/i_.

He felt something washing and warm on his hand suddenly, the thick heat of the man's middle, armor that was sharp on the back of Hiccup's hand. He felt wings rush around him, Astrid's warrior yell, next to him, his back on the ground again, and a weight above him, pressing him, crushing him. Air burst into his lungs, the hand on his throat loosening, and Hiccup gasped, his chest shivering, a thrusting cough spitting out of him. Pain and hurt swarming his nerves, a vision swimming with confusion and slowly, slowly . . . He felt warm liquid spill thickly down his upper arm, realized with a shock that the man he was fighting had fallen on top of him, that his suddenly quiet body was bleeding, that the sword he had wielded was on the ground, next to Hiccup's head, glinting with fire and dulled with dirt. Trapped, Hiccup's hand still beneath him, holding onto that arrow between the plates of armor and leather. Hiccup's breath shook inside him, as he felt, breathed into the man's heavy, leather, grimy clothing, soaked in sweat and ash and a warrior's stench, and looked into the man's face, the hateful gaze of his enemy, the nerves that made his cheek shake, the filaments of his sweaty hair shiver in the burning stillness that was suddenly between them. The man was still alive, a fact that made Hiccup suddenly terrified. Not because an enemy wasn't dead, but that Hiccup would see him go, and know that it was his own hand which killed him.

Hiccup let out a nervous moan, yanked hard on the arrow, removing his hand from the man. The man's hardened face contorted suddenly, his groan sharp and pained, looking into Hiccup's face with a curved agony creasing his brows. Hiccup felt blood, a sudden rush of it, pulse out of the man's wound, the chest of his enemy shaking violently, desperately, his heartbeat close to Hiccup's own chest, the pumping instability in its pulse, and the angle of the arrow he pulled . . . it had thrust up into the man's heart, or somewhere near it, which explained the immense rush of blood, the torture in the man's eyes, as he stared into them, watched the life in them ebb, fade . . . close. A spasm shot through Hiccup's body, a disgust, a wild fear and a panic scrambling in his heart. He lashed away from the man, gasping out his own breath, the arrow in his hand tumbling out, dropping from his hand still wet with the life of his victim.

The pain in Hiccup's back came screaming back suddenly, and he yelled, a surging moan in his throat, the pressure of the man's corpse too much on his whipped and bleeding body. Toothless was suddenly there, hissing, clawing, throwing the weight off Hiccup with a hated urgency, turning back to the boy and nosing him violently, concern wild in his eyes. Hiccup clenched his teeth, hissed in a breath. Toothless moved around to his head, pawed the ground around him, and Hiccup lifted his arms, reached for Toothless' rigging, something to grab onto. Astrid skidded to the earth next to him, shouting, something Hiccup couldn't catch in the urgency of the moment, as she turned her back to him, grabbed his arm and threw him over her back, his head flung over her shoulder. He yelled, the motion torturous, and she hesitated a moment, only a moment as the yell of warriors came crashing into his ears. She threw herself over

Toothless' back and the dragon wailed, anger and sorrow in his voice. "Toothless, go!" she shouted, and slid Hiccup down off her back, behind her. "Hold onto me!" she screamed in the chaos, drawing Hiccup's arms around her. He pressed his arms around her waist, tried to be firm, felt weak, his own consciousness flashing away from him, like the sun behind scuttled clouds. His back pulsed and ebbed, irritated, frustrated. "i_Arghh/i_-" he moaned, sharply, vocally. His fist clenched and he pushed his forehead into her back.

"Hiccup- just, keep calm, you're gonna be okay."

He seethed out a breath, tried to concentrate on keeping his heartbeat constant, closed his eyes and saw the image of that man again, still felt the warm wetness staining his arms. Toothless' gait was a rhythm beneath him, hypnotic and pulsing, a jolt that made him spasm as the dragon landed each time into the hard, flaming earth. He opened his eyes sometimes, blinded by the orange and the yellow, the light and the heat, flush on his cheeks, and silhouettes of running shapes flashing by, skirts of women, children on their hands and knees, mothers catching them up. An old man, he swore he recognized him - the balding head and the way he hobbled forward, yelling on his own, telling people to get out. "Fire! Fire!" he called, as if anyone needed the memo. And the crack of whips as small horses whinnied with their riders hasty and urgent lashed them forward. And louder voices, telling the others to get back, back into the thick of the forest. "It's safe there." The flap of wings, the shrill scream of voices, a familiar shout ordering someone to get themselves together. "We've waited far too long for this day." Hiccup heard dragon screams, swooping down and low, and their shapes dark in the air above. Memories flashed through him, his earliest memories - of dragons in the sky, destroying homes, fire and war, his father leaving him on the steps of home, to protect his village and his family. Battle, the constant struggle. And dragons, their wildness terrifying but captivating to him.

A sharp jolt of pain leapt up his back, forcing him back to clarity, and the blue spark of Toothless' blast ahead of him, as the dragon aimed and fired at a flaming obstacle in their path. He kept his arms tight around Astrid, felt her hand holding firm his own, the cool fingers wrapping tensely around his bruised wrists. He kept his head down, felt the dragon screams in the air, filling his ears like a mingled cacophony. The warmth gradually faded, as Toothless raced through the town, and suddenly a pulse of shocking coolness burst upon his body, chilling him. He opened his eyes, found blue darkness ahead of him, trees and bushes, black shapes of people running, reflecting orange and the movement of the flames. He turned back, saw the town below them. Toothless growled and Astrid tensed, her hand on him tightening as he bent back to look- It was destruction on a horrific scale. The landscape was alive with fire, every corner, every shard of darkness, licked by flames. The sea was orange with reflection, the streets lined with light, fingers of yellow glare rising from the chaos. It was the brightness of day mingled with the darkness of night, as black clouds moved in, masked by ash and smoke, over the dark remains of houses and structures. And far away, ships heading out, canvases blooming with air, shaking with urgency, fear in the very air that filled those sails. The crack of flames, the slice of wings in the air, the screaming far away and near . .

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Hiccup turned away, how many lives had been lost in that inferno? It

was so sudden, so powerful and hated, driven by dragons full of passion and anger. Who could stand up to the pointed urgency he felt in those creatures? i_Death/i_, the word breathed on his mind, dark and frightening, his own hand stained with it now. He exhaled viciously, pushed his head into Astrid's back, concentrated on the muscular jolt of Toothless beneath him. They rushed through the woods, the sound of many fleeing feet around them, their shapes lost in the silhouette of trees and branches. The crackle of leaves under them, and the snap of twigs as hundreds fled.

There was suddenly the sound of water ahead of him, a soft coolness in the air, the sound of forest leaves around him, and Toothless jolted to a halt, unsteady and ragged, slipping to the ground, uncharacteristically. Hiccup felt a wave of panic surge through him, that motion in the dragon meaning only one thing. "Toothless-" he gasped, sliding to the ground, soft dark grass on his knees. "Ouch . . ." he lisped, and he could hear Astrid telling him to take it easy. He stumbled to his feet and crawled on his hands and knees to Toothless' head, falling on the ground, his arms loose over the dragon's ear panels. His back pressed thick with pain on him. More motion, more irritation. What did he figure after nearly dying? He ignored it, put his hand out and stroked the side of Toothless' head. "Buddy?" he breathed, looking over the dragon's scales, seeing the injuries, the one arrow still trapped in him, and the cracked scales. He pursed his lips.

Toothless hummed, leaned his head up to look at him, the growl in his throat strong, firm. His eyes were soft and gentle, comforting, sparked with pain, but . . . steady. Hiccup inhaled again, his breathing hoarse. The dragon had done what he wanted, getting his boy out of there, away from danger, from death. That's what those eyes were saying. Hiccup felt a surge of strength choke his heart, and he coughed in a breath, kept his one hand on Toothless as he reached for the last of the arrows in Toothless' body. He yanked with a force unknown to him, threw the stained weapon on the grass. Toothless yelped, jerked as the wound opened. "It's going to be okay, bud," Hiccup said quickly, pressing his palm into Toothless' red scales. It pained him to see Toothless like this. The dragon gurgled, hummed, pushed his nose into Hiccup's knee.

Astrid was suddenly by his side, taking hold of his shoulders from behind. "Astrid-" he yelped. She said nothing, pushed him forward towards Toothless, a gasp escaping her lips. He sucked in a breath, her hold on him bending his back a little too forward for his comfort. "Hey, that's kind of painful. If you don't mind-" He steadied his hand into Toothless, head down. Her hands let up, gently, shocked in their motion. Her fingers moving deftly over his back, pressing the strips of torn skin, the clothing that was so soaked with his blood that their tattered edges melded into his back. He could only imagine what it looked like on the outside, didn't even want to fathom an image. Toothless hummed suddenly, sensing the tension. Astrid's hand paused, and the other hand on his shoulder squeezed suddenly, a gasping hold.

"You seen enough?" he whispered, breathing out forcefully.

"More than enough."

Astrid's voice was restrained in anger. Hiccup turned around to her, his head suddenly heavy, exhausted. Her eyes were alive with rage,

hard and convicted in their passion. Her hand moved down to her skirt, and he heard cloth rip, saw her fingers come away beneath her spiked armor, the shape of her thin legs appearing behind the open spaces between the panels. She pulled the cloth of her skirt around his torso, and he pressed his teeth together as she pulled taut. "What did you let them do to you?" she whispered, cracked fire in her voice.

"Isn't it obvious?" he lisped, gasping as she tied tight the cloth.

"Animals," she hissed, in a tone that suddenly frightened him.

"It's okay," he said, quickly, shaking his head, stroking Toothless, trying to feel the scales warm on his palm. "I chose it," he swallowed. "I wanted to-" He couldn't put the word out, not straight out like that. Toothless rose suddenly, sensing the pain in Hiccup's voice, nudged his head into the boy, licking him, humming. "I'm okay, bud," he whispered, jerking back as the dragon pressed his nose into Hiccup's cheek.

Astrid was suddenly close to him, by his side, her face near his. He turned to her, those eyes were wide in the dim light, looking out at the fire still burning somewhere far behind the thick trees, the people still fleeing through the woods and a short distance from them, smoke rising high into the dark sky, the deep rumble of that mountain even farther away, the haunting swoosh of wind and the noise of the water behind them. "Trying to be a hero." Her voice was knowing. Her eyes were still hard, but in the midst of them, the humanity in her heart, something she wasn't saying out loud.

He shook his head, breathed and looked away from her, bit his lip, as much a spasm from the pain as from his confusion. "Can't have both of us . . . killed," he smirked. He inhaled carefully, looked up at her.

Her face was strong, but the strength now was of something higher, beautiful, she looked beautiful, and in her eyes was a spirit he could only name as admiration. He looked away suddenly, and felt her hand on his knee, her soft palm around his chin. She pressed her lips to his suddenly, and then her forehead touched his, her voice whispering something he could not hear, her hand holding his head, pressing in with a measure of desperation in that grasp, desperation and hope and trust. He closed his eyes, the warmth of Toothless by his side, Astrid supporting him, the chaos and the madness he had left behind, and his Dad . . . he missed him, terribly. He wanted to tell him he was okay, that his son was still alive. Because who knows what nightmares waged in the mind of a father who had started a war on behalf of a son who was meant to be executed? He heard the soft rush of wind through the trees, the pant of a confused and trickling stream of people crashing through the underbrush. Images flashed in his mind, the pain he had felt and done, and he tried in vain to push the thoughts away. There were still things he had to do here, before he could finally rest.

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It was as if he expected it, as if it wasn't really a surprise when he heard it.

"He says your son is dead already." The messenger's voice was fast.

Stoick's breath heaved hard in him, thick emotion fighting in his soul. That couldn't be true. It was denial, he knew consciously he could not believe that his son had been killed. That's the reason he was here, the reason he hadn't turned back for hopelessness all this way, the reason he pushed on through every casualty report and battle. It was more than just vengeance after all, more than hatred. He was battling his brother to get his son back, and he could not let himself fail that mission.

And yet was his brother the kind to offer mercy? After what he had done already? Would he play games with him?

Stoick had often joked that Hiccup, in all his weakness, would get carried away by a dragon, would end up some creature's lunch because of his childish rashness at dragon raids at home. A thousand times the boy almost got himself killed. But that was his greatest fear, wasn't it? That he'd lose him, that he would live to bury the person he loved most . . . again.

No.

It wasn't going to end like this. He would not mourn, not yet, and he would not give up until he'd seen his son's lifeless body. He'd lived through one horrible moment when he thought his son had died, and his son had surprised him, as he'd always done, and survived. Maybe the impossible had happened again and maybe he would trust that it could have happened, because this was his Hiccup and Hiccup always did the stupid, rash things which ended up saving them all. No word of man was going to stop him from fighting, and neither would this faceless word from his brother stop Stoick from fighting.

"Get out of my face," he hissed to the smug Skirra Vellite. The horrible arrogance of that face burned into his soul and Stoick ordered the man thrown overboard. There would be no message back, no message that his daughter was still alive. Let him suffer, let him worry, did he think the life of his daughter so small when up against hatred? How low had he fallen?

He called Thornado to him, mounted him, his weapons doubled and stashed over his armor. "Where are you going?" Gobber yelled.

But a fire burned inside Stoick, without words or a fool's hope, just a strong sense of battle - for himself and his son. No thoughts and no conclusions came to his mind, except to fight. He'd wasted too many hours playing child's games, being safe, keeping war to the strategy that would keep his people safe, that would best gain him the advantage in the scheme of things, the kind of war he wanted his son to run - mature, strong, victorious. But this wasn't a war for land or gold, but for lives, and he wasn't going to try holding back anymore, at least not for himself. He'd blamed his son for being rash, to save that dragon, and it was a move which put so many lives at risk - but what was Toothless to Hiccup anyway? He hadn't wanted to admit it before when he told his son how extravagantly he doted on that creature, but he felt it now. A bond unbreakable, one that risked all. Like father, like son.

Like what he was planning to do.

"Gobber," the chief shouted down to the man as he looked up at him, worry creasing his face. "Spitelout gets command for now, I'm heading in myself. Get cover fire for the flank, use our reserves and push forward. No more holding back, this is it. Take care of things until I get back."

"Stoick, where are you going?" Gobber's voice was suddenly very grave, as if he knew.

But some things you don't say out loud. Stoick turned his dragon, kept his gaze on the land ahead, so far away, a surge of murderous anger in his warrior's soul and the image of his brazen brother seared into his mind.

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Heather's senses were numb, and the bonds on her hands were loose, loose enough to slip from, but where would she go? Her mind was still trying to grasp the meaning of what just took place - the message her father had sent, the intent he had in it, why would he do that? He couldn't have killed Hiccup, she knew that, because she'd seen him and she'd experienced it herself, that boy would not die, there was something with him that she could not understand, but it was a force, a power that kept him going, no matter the pain and the threats they'd thrown at him. Maybe it was Fate, maybe it was him. But this lie her own father had given the enemy - if Hiccup truly was alive, as she believed him to be, if . . . how could he say that? Even if Hiccup was good as dead, how/i could he chance that? Did he not see the choice before him? Did he not know that what he said meant that he had given her to them? That he had ensured her own death?

Maybe it was his mind, this pressure had struck him, and he made a choice that was rash, hateful, confused. But risk the life of your own daughter? What was it? Was it that this hatred had driven him to something irreversible?

Vengeance, honor, it was the thing which kept the two of them together and driven through these years of wandering, the hours of hopelessness, the nights she stayed up and watched him deteriorate slowly, consistently, as his own death stalked him. The death she so desperately wanted to stop, and yet . . . did he not love her? Was he that desperate to keep Hiccup, to hold onto that glimmer of hope that he could be saved, to give up his own child, the child he himself had saved out of the fires of plunder and raid. Did she mean so little against the pain in his soul? She/i would kill for him but would he kill her? Or had this mission to cure his heart turned it to stone?

But she would not show her emotions to the enemy, and Heather looked out, felt the splash of water against her face, as the ship jerked forward in a haste borne from panic, as she could read in the enemy's face, as they watched frantically their leader fly away, leave his people, to what? Pursue a failure? A foolish hope that might be true. And her, would they kill her then? Wasn't that the bargain? Isn't that what her father wanted?

She leaned over the edge of the ship, still felt the humming pain of that dragon's teeth in her legs. It was a mere physical thing, a

scratch of insignificance compared to the splitting agony in her heart. She didn't want it to get to her, resisted the clawing bitterness and anger against that man she called father. As water and air splashed over her, the fire and breath of dragons in the air and in the sea, warriors fast and violent. War, as she stood there, watching, no one protecting her, no one telling her to step back, no one carrying out the threat of the bargain, as she watched, unmoved, her heart fighting to reason, still trapped in its own desperation. And the shore, coming closer, as she saw out there the chief's dragon land, and then - was that Rune? On the shore? She turned down, hissed in a breath. It couldn't be.

"Get ashore!"

"Beach the ship!"

"Go! Go! Go!"

Men jumping over, ignoring her, the sand and rocks hitting the edge, swords glinting out, some already aware that the journey to shore had struck in them a blow of men and material. The one-legged man screaming out casualty reports, and another, commanding the other ships to collect themselves, gather together and focus forward, *i_forward/i_*. She closed her eyes, the cacophony of war around her, her hands wet, her heart screaming, the warmth of dragon fire, the cool splash of ocean and the color red in the sea before her, the blood of war, and the rush of men behind her, getting off, past her, and then a scream ahead of her, she looked up, gasped, the wind buffering her black hair, as she looked out and saw her father, her father's brother- and it was like Fate would have it come to this.

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The shore was hard, dirty, littered with a scatter of rocks green and gray and pieces of war - weapons, charred remains of wooden axes, clothing and armor that dragon fight had removed, and the red swash of blood, always soothing out to shore, the water lapping it up like a hungry creature, alive, vicious, and cool.

Stoick stumbled off Thornado, his eyes hard and sure on the object of his righteous fury. There, his brother, that horrible man. It was windy on the shore, wet and confusing, but in Stoick's mind there lived nothing but his brother. "Rune!" he shouted, his voice outside of himself, loud and bitter. The foreign warriors around them, kicking up the rocks, their weapons brushing by him as if he were a spirit outside their own consciousness. He felt almost unliving, unreal, charging on a mission to do something he wasn't sure himself of. To tell that man what he thought of him, the audacity to threaten his flesh and blood, the price he'd pay for treason and treachery. He would have forgiven him, he was *i_willing/i_* to forgive him, to put the past behind both of them. It had been so many years, almost two decades, why *i_couldn't/i_* he put the past behind him? What was wrong in doing that? Why couldn't he do the same? They both had mourned the loss of Valla, so how did he think himself so different, to take out this revenge on him and his son?

A dragon screamed above him, filled his ears with the fury of that creature, with the burning fire in his heart. Rune's eyes met his suddenly, the space between them filled with smoke, ash, and the

swirling air of the sea, the breath of dragon's fire and the splash of water. He stared into those eyes, realized how familiar they were, how this man was someone he lived with, loved once, shared a childhood with, for all their differences. But those eyes he last saw with anger were angry still.

"I once called you brother," he shouted, the hurt and anger cracking in his harried voice, his breath choking with the breathlessness of fury. For an instant of clarity he saw the sadness in this tragedy, the end he knew was about to come to one of them. There was no mercy in his brother's eyes and there was no mercy in his own heart. Rune, for whatever name he had once with them, had crossed a line that no man should cross. The time for mercy had passed. He had offered him peace, but he had come in war, he had offered him forgiveness, but he had only given back hatred and murder. This would be to the death, Stoick knew that, he was prepared for that, and for his son, he was willing to go that far. It was between him and Rune now, no battles, no armies, no dragons. Man to man, one to another. Maybe violence wouldn't prove to him that he was wrong, but it would prove to him that he would never conquer, and that retribution is alive in the hearts of those who are hurt, of those who are wronged, and those who know the right is on their side.

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Heather felt the heart in her jump. She'd expected her father to succumb to his illness at some point, it was a curse on his body - but she'd wanted to at least delay that inevitable. Cure his heart so that his body would come alive.

Never would she have imagined the war taking him, him who was invisible in battle. Her scream was wild and reckless, as her legs crashed through the sand and waves, as she watched her father take up his axe and wield it, heave it up into the murky air - slicing down, clap and shock, against the same weapon of his brother's. She heard the guttural grunt of their voices, her father's swing hard and yet fragile, unlike him, lost of some of its power, she could tell. He was normally fearless in war, but here, he was different, still strong but somehow weak, and maybe it was the fact that it was his own brother he fought, someone who looked so much like him, fought with an arm that sparked in her memory like lightning. The vision when she herself was lost in the water, that river so close to home, and a man from the enemy came and picked her up, brought her home and called her his own. She fought the stinging pain from the fresh wounds on her leg, stumbled on the rocks and sand, the confusion of war messing up her vision - and yet clearly men were rushing past her, beaching onto her land, weapons raised against her people. One-on-one battle on the shore, the smack of shields breaking, the yell of victory and defeat, the crack of weapons breaking into bone, unclear and painful. War. Her face stung with salt, from the ocean crashing into her, as she caught the ground suddenly, looking up, gasping, seeing through the melee the pair that still struck blows at one another.

She saw the vision before it happened, knew in her heart it wouldn't end happily, knew it as if it was prophesied, that this stained water would wash away all she'd worked so hard to heal.

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Color and fire burned in his heart, searing the sense and reason in his mind, to see his brother there - that man, Stoick. Rune wanted to say so much, accuse him to his face of cheating him for the love of Valla. What kind of a chief was that, what kind of a father to the son that should have been his? He deserved i_nothing/i_. Somewhere the pallor of death needed to curse him. It was like a nightmare alive, the torture of his dreams awake and conscious in front of him, finally - and yet, it was burning his soul, his heart lashing in emotion, fire eating at his arms and lighting up his mind.

"You were i_never/i_ my brother," Rune yelled, heaving his sword, a shatter in his bones as the weapon took on its own life from the power he gave it. His brother deflected the blow, came with one of his own. Rune stepped back, shield up, the wood cracking as his brother's weapon drove into it.

"You murdered my son-" Stoick spat, throwing the axe into the shield again, the wood splitting. Rune shoved the shield down, water splashing, lapping up between them. He looked up into his brother's eyes, a flash of light, creases of anger in them.

"He killed her," Rune spat, lashing his sword out, catching his brother's leg in the slight curve of its shimmering blade. Stoick yelled, gritted his teeth, smoke and ash filling Rune's eyes. He felt his heart heave dangerously, knew it was the hatred storming through it, pounding and thrashing in it, to be so close to bloodshed, to fulfillment. His own brother - that evil man, to take away the one thing which mattered to him, i_his/i_ Valhallarama. Rune stepped up, felt his body unsteady and cracking under him, his brother on the ground, the tide swishing and licking around him. "You've never seen me," Rune shouted, the wind catching his voice, thunder thick behind him. "You've never seen the i_pain/i_ I've gone through." Lightning, flash in the black. "You've never seen the i_torture/i_."

"You created that torture." Stoick's voice bitter and loud, his form rising from the shore, axe dripping with wet and foam. Rune pressed his lips together, a spasm of weakness paralyzing him a moment, the fire in his soul alive and writhing, beyond his body, screaming to be let out, to do something. "i_He/i_ brought it on me," Rune spat, his voice shaking, cold.

"He only lived."

"He i_killed_ _her!/i_" _Rune heaved the sword and met the head of Stoick's axe.

"Then blame i_her!/i_" Stoick shouted. "She wanted him alive." He slid the axe down the blade, jamming his hands into his brother's. "She risked her life to save him. i_She/i_ did it, not I, not anyone. It was her. She wanted that child. Would you tell me to my face she was wrong?" His voice hissed, and their eyes met, staring into one another, wet and angry, cold and burning all at once.

Sword and axe clashed that day, brother to brother, on the brisk, rushing shore, the night of darkness falling, ash and shadow breathing into air, the hulls of ships cracking, burning, as dragons breathed upon them. And warriors, the remains of many, friend and foe, mingled on the shore, lapped by the waves that carried their lifeblood to the sea, where a thousand water dragons still played, alive with the tension in the water and the confusion in the air

above. The hiss of creatures rose into the air, as caged and free dragons alike sensed the climax of the struggle, felt the dragon time coming, when they could throw off their human riders and turn the violence upon all of men.

Rune pressed his sword against his chest, as Stoick threw his heavy body into his, both of them crashing into the water, the hard knobs of pebbles chipping into Rune's back. He hissed, fought the weight above him, the hot angry breath of his brother, the warmth of his bosom on his, cold metal of their weapons pressing flat against one another.

"And you would kill me, brother," Rune breathed, the battle biting at his strength.

"i_Now/i _you call me brother."

"Let me return that favor," Rune choked, his heart heaving, as he struck his arm, now free, into the armor in front of him, his weapon sinking into the body of the man he once knew as his family. He could barely hear the grunt that escaped Stoick's lips, but he felt it - the weight falling on him, the cringe of his knuckles and the tense firmness in his arm. Rune's own eyes were dilating, losing focus, as something hard and tense grabbed his chest, and his breath locked up on him, screaming in his mind. He tried to see his brother, tried to grab that filament of satisfaction he should have for what he'd done, but why couldn't he see him? Why was his vision blurred? Why now? "i_No/i_," he gasped, and turned over, tried to clear his eyes, to see - more than just the redness and the dark shape of the other man, the floating glint of his weapon on the water, like the gleam of sunlight in a storm, the murky waves of the sea. He needed more than that, he needed to i_see/i_ him, the pain in his eyes, the longing for life, the retribution and the revenge and the sorrow. He needed his eyes to be clear, i_clear/i_ but why, why the murky water and the blindness, the choking visions of nothing, screaming in the air and red water in his eyes, splashing now and a voice, something familiar. He cried out, reached for his brother's body, to feel it once more. But he came back empty, his chest locking up on him and his hands flailing hopelessly in the rush of the water. And then-

"Dad-!"

Rune yelled, his shoulders hard and sparking with pain, his jaw suddenly hard.

"i_Dad_/i"

That familiar presence. i_I didn't see his eyes_,/i he gasped, if only in his mind, as the familiar arms came around him and his own eyes bleared out in clarity for a moment, and in an instant he saw - that familiar face, the tender face that was suddenly close and staring at him, water in those new and lovely eyes. Her hair was wet and black, slick in the darkness, a sheen on them from the moisture and the glow of lightning and fire, her clothing wet and ragged, and her lips, trembling and open, screaming for him, why so loud? Daughter, why so loud?

"Heather . . ." he choked suddenly, his breath caught inside him. His daughter. She was alive. But wasn't, didn't . . . his brother had

killed her, his brother had cheated and gave him a false bargain. He'd do a thing like that, he believed his brother would pull a trick like that. Like it was so many years ago, with Valla, he'd do it to him to spite him and defeat him. And yet-

"Dad, father, please . . ." Her soft, warm hand on his shoulder, her hair falling on his chest.

His eyes cleared suddenly, and he saw the clouds above, the crisp bold wings of dragons in flight, of his warriors yelling, their dark forms atop those creatures, swooping down against other dragons, collisions in mid-air, great living beasts falling to the earth in a scream of fire and motion. And the cool water in his ears, the water finding his wounds, the pain somehow nothing compared to the squeezing in his chest, and yet - in those eyes above him, those living eyes, alive with tears. Tears he never saw her cry. His own Heather.

He felt cheated, betrayed, saddened - and confused, because why didn't his brother kill her? When he had the chance? Rune turned, tried to see Stoick, found only gray rushing ocean by his side. Gray, endless, cold and mad, terrifying ocean. An ocean that changes its face and its mood day by day, an ocean that is never constant, that swallows others in their futility. Could his brother have changed since he last met him? And those words, *i_she wanted him alive/i_*. For so long he'd hated Hiccup, he'd hated the boy who killed his love. *i_She wanted him alive_/i* Stoick had kept Heather alive . . . but how could he dare bargain with him? He was hurt, he needed to exact violence on something, someone. That was the point wasn't it? The pain in his chest and shoulders burned suddenly, making him convulse, shout. That was the point, and he'd gotten his retribution didn't he? Hiccup was going to die, and Stoick had fallen. Then why the torture in his heart, seeing Heather there - that error in his logic, that thorn in his mind, about who his brother was, what he believed about him. What if what he said about Valla was true, what if the boy who killed her was the boy she chose to die for?

End
file.